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ROSALEE



M.E.FRANCIS



May Blundell

DARK ROSALEEN

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A STORY OF IRELAND TODAY

BY

M. E. FRANCIS

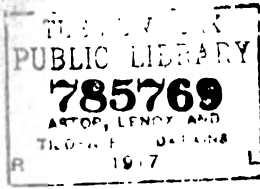
(Mrs. Francis Blundell)

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"O my dark Rosaleen,
Do not sigh, do not weep!"



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To
The Ladies of Kilcornan
With a special word of gratitude
to
Miss Matilda Redington

Ms. A. 9. 6. 17.

PART I

DARK ROSALEEN

CHAPTER I

DOCTOR BODKIN had finished a strenuous morning's work in the dispensary—twenty-five years ago the dispensary doctor was usually a very busy man—he had risen from his chair and was drawing on his well-worn leather gloves preparatory to beginning his round, when the open door was darkened, practically blocked, indeed, by the tall and imposing figure of a woman.

“Hallo, Honor; it's you, is it? I thought I'd settled your business last week. What are you bringing the youngster here again for? Got a bad arm, I suppose? Well, he ought to have a bad arm, and you oughtn't to be taking up my time with your nonsense.”

If the words were rough, the tone was good-natured, and as Honor advanced into the room she smiled broadly.

Honor Burke was a magnificent specimen of Irish womanhood; her figure, in spite of its great height and ample proportions, was graceful; she crossed the room with the free tread of one accustomed in early youth to go barefoot; her face, irregular though it might be in feature, had a warmth of colouring, a changefulness of expression, above all an intense vitality which rendered it beautiful. Under the strongly-marked eyebrows—black, as were the masses of crisp hair growing low on the broad forehead—shone eyes

brightly blue; as the red lips smiled they displayed strong and faultless teeth.

Lifting the shawl which was wrapped round her, and under which had been clearly defined the form of a child, she halted in front of the doctor. The baby, a fine specimen of about six months old, yawned, stretched itself, and clutching at the broad bosom on which its head had been pillowed, endeavoured to raise itself.

"Hallo!" cried the doctor again, gazing from the child to its guardian. "Have you got twins, then?"

"Twins?" echoed Honor, with a laugh. "No, thank ye, docthor; wan's enough—an' where in the name o' goodness would I pick up that red head?"

The baby, which she had now raised to a sitting posture on her arm, certainly offered a strong contrast to herself; its lusty limbs were milk white, its face ruddy and fair, while the thick crop of hair which covered its head was indeed red, but so bright a red that it might almost have been called orange.

This idea seemed to strike Dr. Bodkin, for he burst into a laugh as he passed his hand over the tight curls.

"I was going to ask you," he cried, "what you have to do with this young Orangeman."

Honor's laughing countenance suddenly sobered.

"Indeed, there's many a word of truth spoke in fun, your honour," she said. "It's a young Orangeman, he is, God help him!"

"Well, he's to be vaccinated, I suppose, Orangeman or no—that's why you've brought him. But while I'm getting ready you'll tell me, maybe, how an Orangeman found his way to Connemara?"

"Sure, ye know the minister over at beyant at Cloon-na-hinch? He has a man for the pony and the garden. McTavish, his name is. He's been in it a long while. He's a quiet kind of a man, with hardly a word

out of him at all for anybody. Well, a couple o' year ago he went off with himself to Belfast—that's where he comes from—and came back with a wife."

The doctor now approached, lancet in hand.

"Well, get that child's arm out of his sleeve. The mother keeps him nice and clean, I see, and he's a fine boy."

"Troth, he is. Hector's his name, savin' your presence. I says to her I'd be ashamed to give such a name as that to any Christian child. 'Sure Hector's a dog's name,' says I. 'Ye'll never hear of a saint called Hector.' 'I've nothin' to do with saints,' says she. 'An' more's the pity,' says I—that's the way we do be goin' on; but we're great friends, the two of us—whisht now, my jewel, whisht! Och, docthor, isn't it a shame to be scrapin' that way at his poor little arm?"

"Hold the child still, woman. By Jove! he's a strong little beggar and no mistake, and he's a fine temper of his own, too. There, that'll do now. Mind nothing rubs the arm. Take him off, take him off, take him out of this! He might be a young bull the way he's roaring. I'll be calling round in your part of the world towards the end of the week, and I'll have a look at this young shaver and yours too. Fine, healthy youngsters both—I'd like to secure that lymph. By the way, why didn't Mrs. McTavish bring the child herself?"

"Och, she's a sickly, poor little body, an' she was in dread of the three miles' tramp, so, says I, 'If ye'll look after Patsy, I'll take Hector to the docthor.' 'Twas the minister made a p'int of the child's gettin' his arm cut—the mother was in a great way about it. Well, I'm off now, sir. I'm afeard o' my life my little fella will have druv' Rose McTavish near out of her mind by the time I get back. He's three months older nor this wan an' takes a dale o' notice. He'll be apt to

miss me. Whisht, now, avick, whisht! Sure, we're goin' off with ourselves now."

After bobbing a curtsy, she turned and strode swiftly away, dandling the child as she went. The bright sunshine without gleamed on its copper head, and the doctor looked after them and laughed.

Mr. Marshall's small parsonage stood on the verge of that weirdly beautiful tract of country—Connemara. It was a tiny and exquisitely neat house surrounded by a pretty garden. As Dr. Bodkin reined up his horse he could see on the farther side of the trim hedge the tall, stooping figure of a red-bearded man.

"This is Master Hector's father, I should think," he said to himself, and thereupon uttered an ear-piercing whistle.

The red-bearded gardener continued to plant cabbages without raising his head.

"Hallo, McTavish!" cried the doctor.

The gardener raised his head, revealing a serious face enlivened by a pair of very keen, light-blue eyes.

"What will ye be wantin'?" he asked, without moving.

"I'm coming to have a look at that child of yours that I vaccinated last week. Where's this your house is?"

The man, raising a sunburnt hand, jerked his thumb towards the left.

"Yonder yon—at the bend of the road. But ye'll not find the baby there. Mrs. Burke's mindin' him while the wife does her bit of washin'."

Having imparted this information, he returned to his cabbages without waiting to see the doctor ride away. The latter, slapping his horse's neck with the reins, jogged on till he came to the Burkes' dwelling.

It was a thatched house of rather more comfortable appearance than many in the neighbourhood, for Honor's

husband, though a small farmer, was prosperous. He had come, moreover, of a thrifty stock, and being an only son, had not only inherited "the bit of money" which his mother had brought into the family, but had been able to keep his wife's marriage portion intact without being obliged to spend any part of it in paying off younger brothers or sisters. Quite a considerable herd of little hairy red cattle grazed on that bit of reclaimed pasture which he had wrested from stone and bog. Several young horses, bred by himself, roamed over the rock slope above, while sheep picked up a precarious but sufficient living in the granite-strewn portion of his property which bordered the shore. Honor herself was a stirring body who, when not busy about the house, would help her husband to shear these sheep and, subsequently, prepare and spin the wool, which, when woven into flannel or coarse, strong cloth, would not only provide her own and her husband's clothing, but would fetch a good price when the surplus was sold. She brought up geese and chickens, and would journey many miles to carry eggs and poultry to certain customers among the gentry. Sometimes the little "ass-car" would be used, but more frequently Honor preferred to sling a basket on her sturdy arm and tramp off with her springing tread, the folds of her red petticoat swinging like a Highlander's kilt, her dark cloak ballooning as the wind lifted it.

Bodkin fastened his horse to the gate-post, and, picking his way across the yard, knocked with his whip at the lower portion of the half-door.

"God save ye kindly, whoever you are!" cried a voice from within. "Come inside; I'm just busy at my spinnin'."

The doctor, without troubling to unfasten the latch, swung his long legs over the half-door and then paused to look about him.

The turf fire smouldered on the hearth, the smell of newly-baked bread mingling pleasantly with its aroma; a scared clucking proceeded from a coop in the corner, through the bars of which two or three very young chickens presently emerged to pick up a grain or two of meal from the earthen floor. A sack of potatoes and a sack of flour supported each other on one side of the wide ingle, a tub of clean water—the family's drinking supply for the day—occupied a prominent position in the centre of the floor; but the wooden elbow-chair was tenantless, and the doctor looked inquiringly round to ascertain the whereabouts of the mistress of the house.

"Mrs. Burke," he called. "Are you there, Mrs. Burke?"

"Ah, then, is it the docthor?"

The voice came from an inner room of which the door stood ajar, and a whirring noise, which he had previously noted, suddenly ceased.

"Don't stop your spinning, woman," he cried. "I'll come in to you."

He pulled the door wider open as he spoke and found himself in the family bedroom, a narrow chamber almost completely filled by a four-post bed with green check hangings. Having squeezed himself with difficulty round this massive piece of furniture, he discovered Honor seated on a narrow bench close to the window, her wheel in front of her, and a great ball of yarn testifying to the extent of her labours. One strong, brown hand still held the thread, while her bare foot pressed the treadle of the wheel.

The doctor gazed at her approvingly; something in her aspect reminded him of some sculptured figure he had once seen, emblematic of Destiny.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Burke; don't stir—don't stir! I've come to look at these twins of yours, and see what I can get out of them."

He turned to the bed and stood for a moment in laughing contemplation.

On a coverlet of green baize, material chosen, no doubt, partly on account of warmth and cheapness, but largely as a tribute to the Irish passion for the national hue, lay the two babies side by side. Patsy, the elder with a dark mat of hair already descending almost to his strongly-defined brows, his chubby, brown face a miniature replica of his mother's, save that his eyes, too, were dark, was contentedly kicking his sturdy, naked limbs, very ineffectually covered by his short red petticoat. Hector, who looked somewhat pale and heavy-eyed, and was evidently suffering from the effects of the vaccination, had fallen into a troubled sleep, his orange head propped against the other's shoulder, one dimpled hand clutching at the folds of Patsy's single garment. The doctor turned his attention first to Patsy.

"Upon my word, this youngster does you credit, Mrs. Burke. Let's see—how many teeth? Four, I declare. He'll soon be able to chew a beefsteak. Have you thought about weaning him yet?"

"Ah, no, sir; sure there's time enough. I like him to have all the comfort he can, the creature, while his gums is botherin' him."

"His arm is quite well, I see. Nothing to be got from him, the young rascal. Now let's have a look at this chap. By Jove, his arm's taken well!"

"You won't want to go hurtin' him again, will ye, sir?" asked Mrs. Burke, rising and coming to his side.

"No, no; I needn't even wake him. I've got a little tube here, you see; I don't expect he'll stir. Fine little chap; but he's like his father, isn't he?"

It amused the doctor to trace under the baby curves the high cheek-bones which would presently emulate

those of McTavish, and to note that the red-gold fluff clothed a head that even in babyhood was long in shape.

"He's like the mother, too, though," said Mrs. Burke, watching anxiously. "Ah, docthor, take care, won't ye? He can't bear so much as the weight of his little shimmy on that arm. Ye'll have him woke up on me, an' me only just after sittin' down."

Hector did indeed open his eyes—eyes of the same curiously light hue which Bodkin had noticed in McTavish—and after a moment's bewildered pause broke into loud cries, more of wrath than of fear or pain, for the doctor's manipulation was, in truth, very gentle. Patsy, not to be behindhand, uplifted his voice also, and stretched out his arms towards his mother, large, round tears rolling down his face.

"There, there, I'll be off," cried the doctor, making for the door, while Honor, with a distracted expression, flung an arm round each infant, endeavouring to soothe them both at once.

Just as Dr. Bodkin was about to unfasten his horse, he discovered that he had dropped his handkerchief in the farmhouse, and, retracing his steps, entered the kitchen in the same unceremonious way as before, after a perfunctory tap at the half-door.

Peace seemed suddenly to have descended on the inner room, and when he pulled open the door, he found, to his amusement, that while Patsy, sitting upright in the bed, was sucking a spoon contentedly enough, though his russet cheek was still wet with tears, Honor was suckling the red-haired baby.

"Ah, sure, the poor little fellow's sick," she explained, reddening and hastily turning away. "An' I'm not doin' Patsy out of his rights—God bless him!—there's plenty for the two of them. Aye, there's many a time this little fellow 'll take a share. I couldn't

be bothered runnin' over with him to McTavish's every time he commenced bawlin'."

"Truly the Irish are a wonderful people," thought Dr. Bodkin as he rode away; and an odd fancy seized him that the little scene he had just witnessed was emblematic of Ireland herself. Honor, the very type of bountiful motherhood, nourishing at the same bosom the child of her own flesh and the stranger within her gates.

CHAPTER II

It was Sunday morning; the thin-voiced bells of the scattered chapels had long ceased ringing, the solitary chime from the Vicar's tiny church had the still air all to itself.

Alexander McTavish, surveying himself in the small glass that hung by the kitchen window, solemnly finished the tying of his stock, and, uplifting his voice, called for the third time to his wife:

"Rose! Are ye never comin', woman? It'll be a disgrace if it's ourselves that's the last."

"I told ye then," said Rose, emerging from the inner room, "that there's no *raison* nor sense in the two of us goin' out at the same time. I could have managed this evenin', but I told ye I couldn't be ready now. It's easy talkin', but when there's a young child in the house——"

She was a tall, graceful woman, many years younger than her husband, and still pretty, though her once dazzling complexion had faded through ill-health and her features had sharpened. She was neatly dressed in a stuff gown, with a Paisley shawl folded cornerwise and fastened by a cairngorm brooch; even as she entered, she was tying the strings of the bonnet which sat somewhat jauntily on her fluffy red-gold hair.

Alexander surveyed her disapprovingly: "How often must I tell ye to push back that fuzz," he said sternly. "'Tisn't becomin' to a married woman to wear her hair all frizzed about her face the same as if she was a giddy young girl."

He advanced towards her as he spoke with outstretched hand, as though ready to rearrange his wife's headgear himself should she prove recalcitrant.

But Rose stepped aside quickly and pushed back the offending locks with hands that shook a little, biting her lip the while.

"It's the minister's own wish you should attend mornin' service," said McTavish in a milder tone, "and the child's goin' on four; it's time he learnt to sit still and behave himself."

"Sit still, is it!" ejaculated Rose, with a querulous laugh. "You'd better try mindin' him then, and see how ye like it. Come on, Hector; come on with ye now, and mind you're a good boy."

Hector came out of the bedroom with a somewhat strutting gait, for he was arrayed for the first time in a new suit, which had been prudently purchased with a view to his rapid growth; the legs of the knickerbockers, therefore, reached nearly to his ankles, and the cuffs of the jacket swallowed up his broad, sun-burnt, little hands. A straw hat was set well forward on his curly red locks, kept in place by an elastic under his chin.

Alexander's face relaxed as he looked at him; his only son was to him as the apple of his eye.

"Come on, then," he said, fixing his own tall hat firmly on his head and extending a horny hand.

Hector glanced up in his face and gave utterance to a quiet chuckle:

"I've got new clothes!" he announced.

As a matter of fact he said "cose," for he was backward in talking. "Patsy's on'y got an ould skirt."

"You mustn't be thinkin' o' them things," said his father sternly. "This is Sunday, so it is. The Lord's Day. Ye must be thinkin' o' sayin' your prayers an' bein' a good boy."

Hector stared solemnly up at him with his odd, bright light eyes; then seeing that his father's face was set in lines of seriousness that amounted to severity, he pulled a piteous lip, at sight of which Rose flushed with anger.

"The child's not four year old," she said reproachfully, and threw a sod of turf on the fire with a petulant gesture.

"It's time he began to know his duty," said Alexander; but half unconsciously he gave the little hand he held an encouraging squeeze.

Father and son stepped over the threshold together, Rose tarrying an instant to sweep up the hearth, and to cast a hasty glance at herself in the little looking-glass before mentioned; then she, too, came out, locking the house door and pocketing the key, after which she hastened to rejoin the other two.

They passed groups of their Catholic neighbours returning from the performance of their own religious duties. Dark-faced men, most of them wearing the *bawnsean*, or sleeved waistcoat of white homespun flannel; some of the elders had short trousers of the same material, which contrasted with knitted stockings of blue-grey yarn. A few of the more wealthy members of the community wore the traditional swallow-tailed coat, while the headgear of practically all was the *coubeen*, though one or two farmers had beavers of uncounted age and immense furriness. The women and girls walked apart, a comely throng in their red skirts; the matrons wrapped in their long cloaks, while the girls' rosy faces looked brightly out from beneath the folds of the scarlet petticoats which they wore over head and shoulders. Every year did each maiden of those parts fashion for herself such a garment from yarn of her own spinning, the old one descending, when replaced by its successor, to its more natural position.

These young girls went barefoot for the most part, though some of them wore stockings which bore an odd resemblance to mittens, terminating as they did immediately over the instep. Others, again, wore *pampooties*, or shoes fashioned out of raw cowhide; but these were strangers from the Islands. Children scampered in the wake of mothers and sisters—bright-eyed, picturesque youngsters, the smaller boys wearing petticoats differing in nothing from those of the little girls, being thus, according to local tradition, rendered immune from the depredations of the fairies, who, if the secret of their sex were not withheld, might spirit them away. Unpoetically-minded people suggest that the origin of this tradition lay in the fact that tailors are scarce in the neighbourhood of Connemara, and that petticoats are more easily manufactured at home than trousers.

Alexander, marching solemnly along, responded by nods and brief words to the salutations of his neighbours, and these were many, for "the Protestant," as he was called, being indeed a solitary specimen of that genus in Cloon-na-hinch, was rather popular than otherwise. It was known that though he might not say much, he was as willing to "lend a hand" in times of emergency as anyone else. He never meddled with other folks' business or gave anyone a cross word. The Cloon-na-hinch people were quite elated at having a neighbour who, though he lived in a cabin like themselves and earned his living in the sweat of his brow even as they did, was in a peculiar manner connected with the aristocracy, and spiritually rubbed shoulders with the Lord of the Manor. They might entertain the gravest doubts with regard to his spiritual Future, and never alluded to him without some such phrase as "God help him," and "the poor fellow"; but they were secretly rather proud of him as a curiosity.

Strangers in the district would be pointed out "the Protestant's house," and would gaze at it with much the same expression with which they would have contemplated a creek where a crocodile dwelt, or a field in which a buffalo might possibly be grazing.

Presently Alexander's hand was twitched, and in another moment Hector had broken away from him and darted across the road.

"It's Mammy!" he exclaimed, and Alexander, turning, saw him spring into the arms of Honor Burke.

Honor's red petticoat was replaced to-day by a dress of blue homespun; she wore shoes and stockings, but no bonnet, the collar of her cloak resting on her dark head.

"Good-mornin', Mr. McTavish! Doesn't the little fella look grand in his new suit? I declare anyone 'ud think he was six year old. What in the world 'ull Patsy say when he sees ye, Hector?"

"Aye, he's a big boy," said the father, answering the first remark. "Come on, now, Hector; we're late as it is. He's goin' to church with us this mornin', ma'am."

"I want to go with Mammy," shouted Hector, clinging to the blue skirt. "I want to go with Mammy and see Patsy."

"Sure, ye'll see Patsy another day," said Honor, endeavouring to disengage herself, though the expression of her countenance said plainly: "The poor child!"

"I want to go see Patsy," reiterated Hector; and as his father seized him by the arm he had recourse to a favourite device of his when his will was crossed. Making himself stiff and holding his breath till he grew purple in the face, he rendered all attempts at mastery hopeless. No sooner did his father, after an angry shake, endeavour to set him on his legs, than he threw himself back again, lying rigid, his eyes rolling in their

sockets, his complexion deepening in hue, till it seemed as if he must expire before their eyes.

"The divil's got in him!" exclaimed a bystander.

A little crowd began to collect as McTavish, with a flushed face, hauled his son to his feet and endeavoured to drag him onwards. The toes of Hector's stout brogues made furrows in the dust, and he gave a convulsive gasp.

"Let him come home with me for this wance," urged Honor. "Sure, what is he but a babby! It's the new clothes has turned his head. Let him come with me an' ye can raison with him afterwards."

"Aye, do," said Rose. "We're a regular exhibition here, an' the bell's stopped ringin'."

Alexander's face was quite pale, but he loosed the child's hand.

"It's a petticoat ye'll wear from this out, then," he said, "until ye learn sense. Come on, woman."

He stalked away, followed by Rose, while Hector, drawing an agonised breath, gave utterance to a loud bellow.

It is to be feared that Alexander found some difficulty in fixing his mind upon his devotions that Sunday. He was, as a rule, slow to anger, but for once his wrath had been thoroughly roused, and the fact that this wrath had been provoked by the immutable obstinacy of an irrational creature, and that creature his own child, in no way tended to diminish it. Moreover, mingled with his dissatisfaction with the world at large and his own wife and child in particular, there lurked at the back of his mind a growing uneasiness. What was Rose about to allow Honor Burke such ascendancy over the bairn? Hector had called her "Mammy," had thrown himself into her arms, had preferred her company and that of the little rapsallion Patsy to that of his own father and mother; he had foregone the

honour and glory of attending Divine Worship for the first time, though only an hour before he had announced with pride and glee that "he was a real man, goin' to church the same as Daddy." And now Hector would be scampering about the Burkes' yard, playing at soldiers or some other godless game, as if he had no more advantages than Patsy himself.

"They'll be makin' a Papist o' the child if we don't look out," he said to himself; and a feeling of intense exasperation seized him as he turned to glance at his wife. There was that frizzy hair of hers creeping out from under her bonnet after all he had said; she was piping a hymn with evident cheerfulness; she had no feeling of regret for the absence of the little one. Alexander began to fear that his wife was incurably light-minded.

When the Vicar had finished his little discourse—it had something to do with the plagues of Egypt, a subject which as a rule interested Alexander, though the rest of the congregation, consisting chiefly of a neighbouring squire or two and the domestics in their service, who, having heard the good man deliver the same arguments on several previous occasions, seemed in no measure thrilled by it—Alexander went hastily out, followed by Rose at a more leisurely pace, and walked rapidly towards the Burkes' homestead. The father's ears were pricked as they approached for any indication of unseemly mirth or unsabbatarian song; but all seemed unusually quiet.

"I declare! Look at the pair of them!" all at once exclaimed Rose.

She pointed to the doorstep, where Hector and Patsy were indeed sitting side by side, a large bowl of bread and milk between them. Both were armed with spoons, that occasionally clashed together in a sociable fashion. As they looked, Hector dived after a particularly

toothsome morsel which Pat had been endeavouring to coax into his spoon. He was in the act of conveying it into his own mouth when Patsy, with a shout of triumph, jerked his elbow, adroitly caught the sop as it fell, and swallowed it. Then the two, laughing uproariously, rolled over each other in mock warfare, to the imminent peril of the basin of provender.

"What are yez at?" cried McTavish angrily as he pushed through the gate. "Hector, for shame! Is that a way to be goin' on on Sunday?"

Honor's comely face now appeared in the doorway.

"Ye're back already?" she queried pleasantly. "Faith, ye're out airly this mornin'! I wasn't expectin' yez so soon, an' I was afraid the little fella 'ud be hungry, so I made an extry sup o' bread an' milk an' let him share with Patsy."

"I'm sure I'm very thankful to ye," rejoined Rose, while Alexander sourly lifted Hector to his feet. Patsy looked up at him, spoon in hand, his bare, brown feet drumming on the doorstep. The short, red skirt, which barely covered his knees, caught the gardener's eye, and simultaneously a scheme of chastisement, which seemed to him alike ingenious and efficacious, presented itself to his mind.

"Mrs. Burke," he said sternly, "have ye e'er a cast-off petticoat of Patsy's?"

"I have one that's got too small for him," rejoined Honor in surprise.

"Then, if ye'll give me the loan of it I'll put it on Hector here till he l'arns to behave himself an' do what he's bid," said Alexander, glaring at his son with contained wrath.

"Och, McTavish, I think it's you that wants sense!" cried Rose, a red spot of anger defining each high cheek-bone. "Why should the child be forced to wear what he's never wore in his life?"

Detecting a rising resentment in Honor's face at the implied contempt for the native custom, she hastened to soften the impression. "What's natural to one wouldn't be natural to another. I've always kept to my own ways the same as Mrs. Burke has kept to hers. She'd have no notion of puttin' pampooties on Patsy, an' no more would I want to see Hector in a red petticoat."

"Ye'll see him in one now, then," said Alexander grimly. "He was thinkin' himself so grand this mornin', an' offering to turn up his nose at Patsy's skirt—his nice, *new* skirt," he added, emphatically, as he met the wearer's inquiring gaze. "Let him see now how he likes to put up with the one Patsy's cast off."

Hector looked from one to the other as though uncomprehending. Honor, after nodding reassuringly at him, exchanged a significant glance with Rose.

"I'm sure you're welcome to it or anything of Patsy's," she said. "But maybe it's best for ye to try it on first. There 'ud be no use in your goin' to the trouble of cartin' it home without you made sure he was able to wear it. Will you step into the room, Rose? Would yourself step inside an' sit down, Mr. McTavish; or maybe ye'll stroll round while you're waitin'? Himself's somewhere about with little Norah."

McTavish gave an ungracious glance round. "I can stop here," he said. "Ye'll not be that long."

Rose caught up Hector in her arms and followed Mrs. Burke into the inner room, where she seated the child upon the bed.

"Did you ever hear of such a notion in all your born days?" she whispered irritably in the other woman's ear. "The man's gone daft, I think."

Honor winked at her humorously with both eyes together. "We'll be even with him," she returned. "There's no sense in havin' the poor child roarin' an'

bawlin' for nothin'. Look-at here now, Hector, we're goin' to have the greatest fun. It's goin' to dress you up we are, the way ye'll be the same as Patsy. Here's the little petticoat, Rose; I washed it and laid it up safe. It'll come in nice for Norah when she's big enough. By the same token it's time Himself brought that child in out of the broilin' sun. Now, then, Hector, off with your duds—troth that's an elegant little shirt ye have on! Aye, keep it on, sonny. Now we'll pop on Patsy's petticoat. Look at that; it fits him elegant! You'll be able to kick about to your heart's content, my lad. Why, there ye are as grand as the bellows. You're just the same as Patsy now. Come, we'll pretend you're Patsy's brother."

Hector, whose expression had at first been somewhat dubious, and who had fixed his penetrating gaze alternately on his mother's face and on Honor's, finally made up his mind that the occasion was intended to be a joyful one, and capered gleefully about the room. His sturdy limbs, brown for the most part, were almost startlingly white above the knee, as now revealed by the scanty draperies.

"I'm Patsy's b'udder," he announced. "I'm Patsy's b'udder."

Pushing through the half-open door before the women could stop him, he ran into the yard, and with a whoop, which was nothing if not triumphant, flung an arm round Patsy's neck.

"I'm your b'udder now, Pat," he announced.

"Himself," otherwise Pat Burke senior, a thin-faced, delicate-looking man, who had been standing in dignified converse with McTavish, balancing Norah, the eight-months'-old baby whom he had been "minding" while his wife was busy indoors, now broke into a loud laugh.

"Did you ever see the like?" he cried. "Faith, he's

a grand little fella, Sandy!" Pat belonged to the order of folk which delights in diminutives. "It's the greatest of fun they're havin' this morning! To be sure you're Patsy's brother, avick. It's my son ye are now, and that's your mammy," pointing to Honor, who stood laughing in the doorway, while Rose's rather apprehensive face peered over her shoulder.

"Sure your Da's after makin' us a present of ye," he concluded.

Alexander, angry and discomfited as he was, still sought to save the situation.

"It's no laughin' matter," he said. "You'll be sorry to hear the reason I had for puttin' Hector back that way. Maybe ye didn't know he had a rale suit o' proper boy's clothes on him this mornin'? He was to have gone to church with the two of us an' heard the minister preach, the same as Master Harry; but he forgot himself altogether, so he did—it's a rale bold boy he was this mornin'. I had to leave him behind in disgrace, and it's because it is in disgrace he is, he can't be treated like a big boy; he has to have his suit laid by and beg the loan of Patsy's auld cast-off skirt because it's a babby he is. He'll have to wear it till he gets sense."

Hector glared up at him indignantly.

"I'm not a babby—Norah's a babby," he remarked.

"I'm not a baby nayther, then," cried Patsy defiantly.

"Bedad, Sandy, ye'll not get the better of him that way," cried Burke, while Rose in the background murmured something about its being dinner-time.

"I'm goin' to take ye home," persisted McTavish, "dressed up the way ye are, so that the people 'ull see ye're in disgrace—the way them that saw how ye forgot yourself this mornin' 'ull know I'm chastisin' ye for it. Come now; let's be goin'," he added hastily, fearing a repetition of the morning's scene.

But this time Hector gave way to no such paroxysm of passion; he gazed steadfastly at his father, his blue eyes seeming to blaze under their tawny lashes. In his dim, babyish way he realised that he was being punished, humiliated, and he fiercely resented it.

He presently turned and stalked out of the yard in unconscious and ridiculous imitation of his father's gait; but as he reached the road he wheeled and glanced back at the Burkes, who were gazing after him.

"I wisht it was your little boy I was," he cried in a shaking voice. "I wisht I *was* Patsy's b'udder and lived here. I wisht," he added, turning to his parents with a stamp of his foot, "I didn't live over beyant at that ugly place with yous!"

Rose glanced fearfully at her husband, dreading lest this open defiance should be visited by instant and severe chastisement; but to her surprise Alexander stood staring at his son with an expression of amazed dismay that was almost tragic. It was she herself who broke the pause.

"I don't know what's come to you this morning, Hector," she cried severely. "It's out of the wrong side of your bed you got, I'm thinkin', and it's back into it ye'll go for the rest of this day."

She took him by the arm as she spoke, and to her relief the child walked by her side without further protest. She was glad, too, that in the short distance which intervened between the Burkes' house and their own they encountered no one, for in her heart she was angry and as much ashamed as Hector himself.

"Such a piece of work about nothing!" she said to herself. "As if every child didn't get above himself every now and again. I'm sure Honor and Burke must have thought McTavish was making a fool of himself, as well as of the poor little fella. That's what every-one'll be thinkin', and small blame to them if they do."

As they passed the corner near the church they descried the figure of the clergyman immediately in front of them, walking in the direction of the parsonage. Rose would have halted or turned back, but that Mr. Marshall himself looked round and, on identifying them, paused to await their advance.

"McTavish, I want you to——" he was beginning, when he suddenly broke off. "Whose child is that?"

"Mine," said Alexander shortly. "What was ye wantin', sir?"

"Well, I forget what I was going to say now. Will you tell me why on earth you have dressed the child like this? It's—it's hardly decent! I have always noticed how well you have turned him out, Mrs. McTavish, and I think it's rather late in the day for you to begin to copy a custom which is only tolerable among the very poor."

"I'd no notion o' copyin' anyone's custom, then," intervened Alexander, almost savagely. "I've a right to punish my own child when he deserves it, whatever way I like."

Hector stared hard at the minister and then, with a sense of deep injury, at his father; but he neither spoke nor cried.

"H'm!" said Mr. Marshall. "It seems to me an exaggerated form of chastisement. I should have thought myself something shorter and sharper would have met the case. You had better take him home now and keep him out of sight. I must say I have no wish to see him running about the vicarage in that attire."

He passed on, and the gardener and his family slowly followed. When they reached their own abode, McTavish stood drumming with his umbrella on the threshold till his wife unlocked the door, but, entering after her, closed it carefully.

"Take that rag off the child," he announced with a

sudden fury which took both wife and son aback. "Take it off and never let me see the sight of it again."

"Is he to have his new suit on again?" queried Rose.

As Alexander uttered only an inarticulate growl for reply, she took permission for granted, and, ignoring her own previous threat of putting him to bed, hastily clothed the little boy anew in his gala garments, Hector submitting without either enthusiasm or dissatisfaction.

He refused, however, to partake of the midday meal, declaring that he was not hungry, and remained sitting on his little stool by the fire, gazing into it with a sullen, vengeful expression.

"Don't notice him," whispered Rose. "He'll get over it in a while and be glad to eat a bit by and by." But Alexander glanced surreptitiously at him now and again and ate but little himself.

When Rose had cleared away she retired into the inner room to read and rest, as was her custom on Sundays, and McTavish, wheeling his chair, beckoned to Hector.

"Come here, sonny; I want to talk to you."

There was kindness, even anxiety, in the muffled tone, and, after a moment's delay, Hector got off his stool and approached his father, dragging his feet reluctantly.

"Is it sulkin' yet ye are?" whispered McTavish, and stooping, he lifted the child on his knee. "Aren't ye ashamed of yourself, ye bold boy?"

"Daddy," said Hector reproachfully, "if ye told Mr. Burke about me, ye needn't have told the minister."

McTavish, unimaginative though he was, felt a pang of remorse. It seemed to him in some inexplicable way that he had put himself in the wrong. He had no call, he told himself, to humble the child that way. The child was not humbled; that was the worst of it.

An indomitable spirit looked at him out of those blue eyes.

"Well, we'll say no more about it," observed Alexander feebly, after a pause. "Ye'll be a good boy from this out, won't ye?"

Hector's gaze wandered towards the window, and his father did not press the point.

"Maybe ye could ate a little bit now, could ye?" he asked anxiously, oblivious of the fact that the bread and milk of which the young hero had partaken in the company of his foster-brother was sufficient to sustain him for a considerable time.

Hector suddenly rolled his head against the man's shoulder.

"Maybe I will, if ye'll feed me," said he.

It was now nearly a year since the child had, by Alexander's desire, plied his own spoon and fork at meal times; but the request and the accompanying caress were sweet to the father now. Carrying the little fellow in his arms, he went across to the dresser and cut a slice of meat from the joint, providing himself further with a cold scone, a plate, and knife and fork. Hector observed these preparations languidly, and then leaning back luxuriously in McTavish's arms, suffered himself to be fed, smiling every now and again before opening his mouth to receive the morsel which was tendered to it. The man's heart was melted with tenderness as he clasped the little body to him; his whole grim face relaxed, and when Hector smiled, he smiled back almost pleadingly.

"We're friends again, aren't we?" he said, as he laid down the spoon, and Hector snuggled closer into his bosom, one sunburnt hand creeping up beneath the red beard till it clasped his father's neck. He could afford to be magnanimous, for he knew himself the conqueror.

CHAPTER III

THE tide was coming in on the shingly coast, each wave seemingly to leap higher than its predecessor. Patsy Burke and Hector McTavish, now fine lads between ten and eleven, had clambered to the summit of a weed-grown rock, and stood, each braced against the other, in order to resist the attacks of the wild west wind which came swooping down on them in ever fiercer gusts, each one of which threatened to dislodge them from their perch. It was a typical West of Ireland day, water and sky being alike grey, lightened here and there by billowy white, the piled-up clouds looking like monstrous feather beds, the heaving waves churning themselves into milky foam. It seemed a grey country as seen from this point; the boulder-strewn fields laced with stone walls, and the clusters of small cottages of the predominant hue. But here and there vivid streaks of colour relieved the monotony. Certain shelving rocks to the rear of that on which the boys stood, and well above the high-water mark, were covered with layers of brightly-tinted seaweed which had been carried there to dry. Creamy white, emerald green, orange and rose-coloured strands mingled with the various shades of dull and tawny brown. Some of this would be actually used for food, while the rest would presently manure the barren little fields. Other moving objects served to relieve the monochrome: the figures of children in their white and scarlet homespun, who ran hither and thither at the water's edge, watching

for the seaweed which the tide would presently bring within their reach.

Presently Hector uttered a shout so loud and so sudden that the shock of it almost threw Patsy off his balance. He flung an arm round Hector's neck the better to steady himself, and inquired with some indignation "what he was bawlin' for that way?"

"It's a grand day," cried Hector, turning to him with wild, gleeful eyes. "Listen to the wind and look at the waves leppin' out beyant! I do always be feelin' I could dance an' shout on a day like this!"

"You'll dance the two of us into next week if ye don't look out," said Patsy, setting his bare feet with limpet-like tenacity on the slippery rock.

"Look at the little weeshy boat yonder yon!" cried Hector, who was accustomed to blend certain northern expressions with the vernacular. "That fella 'ull have to take down his sail. Look how she's pitchin' an' tossin'. I'd like fine to be in her."

"Is it a sailor or a fisherman ye'd like to be when ye grow up?" inquired his companion, screwing round his head in order to look at him.

"I don't know yet," rejoined Hector seriously. "I haven't my mind made up. Maybe it'll be a gardener, the same as my Da; or maybe I might drive an engine the way I seen the man doin' at Galway station the time my Da drove me in when we went to fetch the seed potatoes."

Patsy, who had never been to Galway station and was a trifle jealous of Hector's adventures on that line, made no response to this remark; and after a pause Hector continued:

"Aye, I'd like to have a big fire in front of me, an' the smoke blowin', an' the great big whistle makin' everybody jump out of their skin, an' the great big wheels goin' round this way, *throro-rum-*

throro-rum-throro-rum! What'll ye be when ye're a man, Pat?"

"I'd like to be a priest," said Pat.

This time it was the red head which turned round.

"Would ye?" asked Hector, almost in an awestruck voice, and screwing up his freckled nose as if he disliked the idea.

"I would," said Pat.

Hector considered for a moment.

"Wouldn't ye like to be a farmer the same as your Da, and own all them horses and cows, an' go cuttin' the turf?"

"I'd sooner be a priest," said Pat.

Here a great wave dashed round the rock, splashing the children's feet, and the two, holding each other's hands, screamed and capered with joy.

"That's the biggest wave ever I seen!" cried Hector delightedly. "It very near swep' us away, so it did!"

"The tide's just on the turn now," answered Pat. "I don't think another as big will get this far."

Hector watched the tumbling waste of waters for a moment or two, and then returned to the subject uppermost in his thoughts.

"Ye'd be able to drive the ass-car any day ye liked, if it was a farmer you were," he argued.

"Ah, I'd sooner be a priest," said Pat.

He stood looking out to sea as the other had done, his brown face outlined against the grey background, an open, sunburnt face with irregular features, a face that lit up wonderfully when he smiled. But Pat was not smiling now; for the moment he was thinking.

As they stood thus, both silent, a small figure detached itself from the cluster of similar ones at the water's edge and hastened across the shingle towards them, halting, breathless, at the foot of their rock. It was Norah, Pat's seven-year-old sister.

Tossing back her wet, dark curls, she peered up at them with something of the bright-eyed intentness of a Scotch terrier.

"Aren't the two of yous comin' down out o' that?" she inquired. "It's meself that's doin' all the work for Widdy Clancy."

"Stand out o' the way, then, an' I'll come lend ye a hand," cried Pat.

Loosing Hector, he leapt from the rock, nearly falling on the shingle, but quickly recovering himself. Hector descended more sedately.

"Me mother bid me not go near the water's edge," said he, "so I can't be helpin' ye. I think I'd best go home now."

Pat and Norah had already scampered away, and Hector, after a somewhat wistful glance in their direction, climbed over the slippery shingle till he reached the stony path that led to the highroad.

The wind, which had buffeted him on the shore, seemed bent on barring his progress now, blowing full in his face as he turned his steps homewards, so that he was obliged to butt at his invisible enemy with his lowered red head, and to stagger from one side of the road to the other in order to make any progress at all. This necessity for continuous effort on his part, coupled with the screaming of the gale, prevented his noticing the rapid approach of a horse's feet, and he was only roused to the sense of his danger when the animal in question was close upon him; only the fact, indeed, of its being pulled up short by its rider averted a catastrophe.

"Hallo, little man, mind what you're about!" cried a good-natured voice. "You were very near done for that time."

The startled Hector turned and saw that the tall, robust figure mounted on the strong, grey horse was a

priest; not Father Moran, who rode past their door every Sunday, and occasionally during the week, but a stranger.

"It's the wind that's drivin' me near daft," remarked Hector in an exasperated tone.

The big man sitting on the horse laughed.

"Faith, I don't wonder at it! Here, jump up in front of me, and I'll take you a piece of your way, anyhow. Where is it you're goin'?"

"To Cloon-na-hinch yonder yon," said Hector.

"Yonder yon, indeed! I'll go bail you're from the North, young man. I'm going to Cloon-na-hinch too. Do you know Burke's?"

"I do," answered Hector. "I was with Patsy Burke down on the shore a while ago."

"Ho, ho!" cried the other. "You're the little Orange-man, are you? I have heard of you, my lad. But we'll give you a lift all the same. Now, then, come along, Duke."

The iron-grey horse broke once more into a swinging trot, and Hector, clinging tightly to the pommel of the saddle, laughed aloud with ecstasy.

"You and Patsy are great friends, aren't you?" said the priest. "My sister told me all about you. Mrs. Burke's my sister."

"Is she, then?" queried Hector. And though he dared not turn his head, the pleasure and excitement which he felt sounded in his voice.

"She is indeed. Aye, I remember seeing you once when you were a little bit of a chap, and she told me then you were in and out of the house the same as her own lad."

"And is it Patsy's uncle ye are?" Hector inquired, after a pause of reflection.

"Well, what do you think?" answered the priest, laughing.

"If you are brother to his mother ye must be," said Hector seriously.

"See then how well you puzzled it out!" returned the priest. "I suppose they teach you how to master all sorts of difficult problems at your school. Come, now; can you tell me if you were to get a pound and a half of potatoes for three ha'pence how many pounds would you get for a shilling?"

Hector cogitated.

"I'd know it if it was herrin's," he said reflectively, and was surprised, and a little offended, to find his remark greeted with a shout of laughter.

He was turning round to stare into the face of his interlocutor, having now more than a suspicion that some kind of trick lurked in the previous question, when the grey horse made a sudden swerve and almost immediately was brought to a standstill. In another instant violent hands were laid upon himself; he was dragged from the saddle and flung on the rough grass by the roadside. As he lay there, half stunned for the moment, he heard the priest exclaim, and the gruff, half-choked tones of a voice which he knew to be his father's respond angrily, the singing in his ears preventing his catching what they said. Then the horse trotted on and McTavish jerked him to his feet.

"What in the name o' goodness, Hector, have ye to do with yon man?"

Hector, still half dazed, stood blinking at him, and his father repeated the question with increasing fury.

"I ask ye what ye have to do with him, ye young spalpeen? If your grandfather was to see ye cocked up on yon fella's horse, he'd turn in his grave."

"He axed me would I like a ride," returned Hector, half aghast, half resentful.

"He axed ye would ye like a ride!" repeated McTavish scornfully. "An' ye said ye would, I s'pose?"

You're no son of mine, then, if ye'd be ready to sell your soul for a bit of pleasure."

"I'd be ready to do no such thing," retorted Hector with spirit; but his voice quavered into silence as he realised the effect which the encounter had had upon his father.

Alexander seemed not only angry, but afraid. His face was white, he was actually trembling as he stood. Only once had Hector seen him affected in such a way, and that was when he himself as a child had, in defiance of orders, amused himself by playing with burning sticks and had set his pinafore on fire. Hector well remembered the paroxysm of mingled fear and wrath which had shaken his father on that occasion, and the severity of the chastisement subsequently meted out to him. The strange words which had just fallen from McTavish's lips, combined with his aspect, served to imbue the lad with terror now.

"What harm was it?" he stammered. "What harm do ye think he'd do me?"

"Where was he takin' ye?" said Alexander meaningly, holding his son with his fixed, glassy gaze, while the slow words dropped from his lips. "Answer me that. Where was he takin' ye?"

"He axed would I like a lift till Cloon-na-hinch," faltered Hector; but the blood began to run cold in his veins.

"Cloon-na-hinch, is it?" repeated the other, with a short laugh, ghastly in tone. "That's what he tould ye, my lad. I'll go bail if I hadn't come up he'd have took ye further nor that."

Some quality of common sense, which Hector possessed in a greater degree than his father, fought against the growing dread.

"Sure, where would he want to take me?" he inquired. "It's Mrs. Burke's brother he is, an' he was

goin' straight there. He's after tellin' me he seen myself above with them wanst when I was little. Aye, an' he told me forbye that Mammy Burke was ever and always talkin' about me till him."

The effect of his words was the reverse of reassuring. McTavish positively staggered back, loosing his grip of Hector's collar so suddenly that the boy reeled. A long pause ensued, and then McTavish said huskily and as though speaking to himself:

"My sin has found me out! Och, Hector laddie, I done wrong—very wrong—lettin' you consort at all with them Papists. Sure I see the plot now, plain! It was the finger o' God brought me out on the road to-day! If I hadn't come up and caught him I'd never have set eyes on you again. Yon black-hearted fella would have kidnapped ye as sure as I'm alive."

"Kidnapped me!" echoed the boy faintly. And then that same element of sanity reasserted itself. "Sure what good would I do him?"

"What good? 'Tisn't for good he'd be wantin' ye. It 'ud be to carry off and make a Catholic of ye. Isn't that what they're all at? Aren't they always nosin' round, tryin' to entice us Protestants away from our own releegion? Doesn't the Pope o' Rome pay out money for every man that turns? Sure, it's well known!"

These time-honoured fables rolled off Alexander's usually slow tongue with a fierce glibness which impressed Hector. He had never known his father lie, and Alexander was repeating statements of the truth of which he was indeed himself convinced. Hector, receiving in his turn the traditions which had been handed down for generations in his family, accepted them unquestioningly.

"Aye, he'd have made a Catholic of ye," repeated McTavish grimly. "A Catholic and a Feenyeen, so he

would. He'd not stop short o' makin' you turn again' the Queen an' be ready to fight for the Pope! They do all have to be swearin' to obey the Pope in everythin', and when the Pope's armies come marchin' through the country destroyin' all before them, it's yourself that 'ud be in them!"

"I would not," cried Hector, stamping his foot.

"Ye won't, because it's myself will take good care ye won't," retorted his father. "Now look at here, Hector; will ye give me your word to have done with the Burkes from this out? Give me your word ye'll never set foot in their place again?"

Hector's indignation and excitement dropped from him; he hesitated before replying.

"I'll not go in it while the priest's there."

"Ye'll not go in it at all," shouted McTavish. "I forbid ye to go next or nigh the place from this out. I forbid ye to have anything whatever to do with any of the Burkes, auld or young—a set o' traitors they are, and herself the worst of them, enticin' ye up beyant the way she'll have ye destroyed. Give me your word now and no more about it!"

"I'll not make such a promise as that," rejoined Hector, trembling but pale. "Mammy Burke's been the good friend to me—aye, that has she. I'm as welcome yonder yon at their place as if it was my own—and Patsy and myself—" Here a rush of tears choked his voice and he continued pleadingly, between his sobs: "Sure, I'd be lost without Patsy—him an' me—sure it's lost with lonesomeness I'd be."

"I'm not goin' to stand here all day arguin'," cried McTavish. "Ye know it's not often I lay a finger on ye, but if ye go again' me in this, I'll have to give ye a lesson that ye'll not forget in a hurry. I'll give ye till I count six to make up your mind."

They stood facing each other on the grassy edge of

the roadside, the wind shrieking round them shrilling through the stone dykes with a sound which almost drowned Alexander's words; but Hector watched his father's lips as he slowly counted.

"Six," said Alexander. And then, as Hector made no movement, he laid his hand on his shoulder and began to propel him towards home.

The boy did not resist, but walked steadily in front of his father, though his soul was in a tumult of wrath and rebellion. His father was going to thrash him, that was certain, and who could gauge the duration and the severity of the punishment? He might beat him till both dropped from exhaustion, but Hector was determined that he would never, never make the required promise. There was an innate integrity in the lad which forbade a seeming capitulation, and this was coupled with an obstinacy which had many times already borne down all attempts at coercion. As they came to the turn of the road which brought their little house in view, a sudden inspiration occurred to him—escape was still possible.

All of a sudden, with the agility of an eel, he slipped out of the jersey, the collar of which his father held in a somewhat slack grasp, and diving beneath his arm, darted like lightning in the direction whence they had come.

Alexander's wrathful shout was lost in the howling of the wind, and after a futile effort of pursuit he gave up the attempt and returned slowly to the vicarage garden. Going to the toolhouse he selected a stout stick from the corner where he kept a bundle of pea stakes, and having duly tested it, sallied forth again, parading the road between the vicarage and his own home so as to catch Hector on his return.

His anger rather grew than diminished as he waited. The lad deserved a lesson, and he should have it! The

stubbornness of him, and the impudence! Here was his father wasting his time while he was waiting—the crowning vexation of the many the child had forced him to endure. What in the world was he doing, keeping away so long? It was long past tea-time and getting quite dark. Suddenly an idea came to him.

“It’s to the Burkes’ he’s gone,” he said to himself. “It’s in hidin’ there he is! Well, if I have to tear the place down I’ll have him out and deal with him.”

CHAPTER IV

THE Burkes' half-door stood, as usual, hospitably open when Alexander came panting into the yard. The kitchen was irradiated not only by the blaze of a noble turf fire, but by two tallow candles, one of which graced the dresser shelf, while the other occupied a prominent position in the centre of the table.

Alexander's gaze, eagerly searching, took in every detail of the scene at a single glance. Pat Burke, the father, was standing up at the end of the table busily employed in carving a pair of boiled chickens, trussed after rather a primitive fashion with legs and wings extended. The task appeared to demand all his attention, and with every movement of knife or fork his lantern jaws opened and closed with a scissor-like action. Opposite him sat Honor, with a row of cups in front of her, into each of which in turn she poured tea of inky blackness from a large brown teapot. On Pat's right, and facing the door, the priest was installed with little Norah on his knee, while Patsy, junior, stood beside him, gazing intently and worshippingly into his face. The priest appeared to be joking with both children, turning from one to the other with some query, and laughing at their answers.

It was a very human, peaceful scene, and one which might well have calmed McTavish's fears and allayed his suspicions. But the thought which leaped into his mind as he beheld it was one of unmollified wrath. What business had they to be sitting there, eating and

drinking and enjoying themselves, when they had stolen away his son's heart from him?

He rapped fiercely with the handle of his stick on the upper portion of the half-door, and at the same moment groped for the latch of the lower half.

"*Cead faile romat*——"* Pat was beginning, when he suddenly broke off. "Why, it's Sandy!" he cried pleasantly. "Come inside, man. Come inside and sit down. Sure it's welcome ye are, Protestant or no Protestant! His Reverence there will excuse ye if ye don't know how to bless yourself."

Pat was in uproarious spirits. A visit from his priest brother-in-law was of rare occurrence, for Father Casey's parish being situated in the extreme north of the diocese, he could but seldom get away to visit his old home in Connemara, and the event was invariably an occasion of high festival and rejoicing in the family. Moreover, Pat felt it to be an honour, not only to receive, but to introduce this distinguished relation to any of his neighbours who had not already the privilege of his acquaintance. He was now disposed to crow over Sandy McTavish. His minister was also his master, but Pat's priest was his own wife's brother—just one of themselves, and as well pleased to put his legs under Pat's table as Pat himself.

In his jubilation he did not notice that Father Casey had stopped laughing and was looking curiously at the new-comer, whom he instantly recognised. In the pleasure of greeting his family the encounter with McTavish had slipped from his memory, and though, no doubt, he would have subsequently recalled and spoken of it, he had as yet made no allusion to it.

"I'll come in, no fear," responded McTavish hoarsely. "I'll come in, but I'll no sit down, nor wouldn't with the company ye've got if yourself and me was as

* You are welcome.

friendly as in times past, Pat Burke. I'm no friend of yours fro' this out, an' so I tell ye. I've only come for that laddie o' mine that ye've enticed away from me."

Honor set down the teapot and rose, her wholesome, handsome face turning pale.

"In the name of goodness, man alive, what talk is this we have out of ye? Sure, when have we ever done anything on ye to put ye out this way? It's not yourself at all ye are! I've never known ye forget your manners this way."

Her voice shook a little, and she spoke regretfully rather than angrily, passing over the insult to her brother. But Alexander was not softened.

"Ye needn't be makin' out to be so innocent, Mrs. Burke," he cried. "Ye know very well the tricks ye still kept up wi' my only son. Ye've stole his heart from me—aye, I ought to ha' found that out long ago—and now ye've been plottin' to steal the whole of him from me. Where have ye hid him, I say? Where have ye hid him?"

"The man's daft!" cried Pat, pushing back his chair and coming a step nearer to the gardener.

"Sit down, man, sit down," said the priest quickly, yet with a smile. "I think I can explain this."

Alexander stood in the doorway, his frowning glance sweeping the room, his arms extended as though to bar the egress of any who might be seeking to escape.

"Aye, do," he cried fiercely. "I'd like to hear what you were doin' with my son this evenin', when you had him cocked up in front o' you on your own horse."

"I was giving the little chap a bit of a ride," returned Father Casey. "I didn't know he was your son when I offered to give him the lift; but to tell the truth it would have made no difference if I did. Come, now," he added good-humouredly, "what harm did it do him? Did you think I wished to kidnap him?"

"Maybe I did—well," growled McTavish. "I wouldn't put it past ye, and the likes of ye, and I wouldn't put it past you, Mrs. Burke, to favour some plot of the kind. Why couldn't ye leave my son alone? What call had ye to be coaxin' him up here ever an' always, the way ye done? He was hardly ever at our place at all. But I'll make an end o' that, an' so I tould him. I've forbid him to be mixin' or meddlin' with any o' yez from this out. Where is he, I ask ye? Give him up to me this minute, or I'll reive the house down!"

The blood rushed over Pat's thin face, and he would have sprung towards the other had not the priest caught him by the arm.

"Leave him alone, Pat," he whispered. "The man isn't himself. The lad isn't here, is he? No, of course he isn't. I came on straight here after his father dragged him off my horse. Well, Mr. McTavish," raising his voice, "your boy isn't here. But you may as well look round and satisfy yourself, so that you can go away contented. He can go inside the room, can't he, Honor?"

"He can so," returned Honor with dignity. "He can look round anywhere he likes. It'll not take him long. Step in an' s'arch for yourself," she continued, turning to Alexander, "an' let me tell ye, once an' for all, I never had any dealin's with Hector that was not out of kindness an' good nature—never a ha'porth else. I thought the poor little fella was lonesome, an' I made him welcome whenever the fancy took him to be comin' up here; but as for plottin' an' contrivin' to be gettin' hould of him—Lord save us, haven't we childer of our own? It's not a strange lad or a Protestant my brother 'ud want to be carryin' off. If he's goin' to priest any boy, it's his nephew there he'll be priestin'."

"Aye," said Patsy fervently.

"Listen here," said Father Casey, casting a humorous glance at McTavish. "Did you ever hear tell of the Birds' Nest?"—as the other stared stupidly at him without replying—"You haven't? I'd advise you to make inquiries about it. Maybe you'd find the boot is on the other leg."

"Aye, would he," said Pat's deep tones.

Alexander looked from one to the other distractedly, and then wandered in a half-hearted way round the kitchen, thrusting his head for a moment through the half-opened door of the inner room, and then withdrawing it disconsolately.

"Fetch over the ladder here," ordered Honor, turning to Patsy, "the way he can go up into the loft."

But McTavish halted when he drew near the table.

"Ye wouldn't be so ready to have me go up it if he was there," he said. "I'll have a look yonder yon, though," jerking his thumb in the direction of the door which faced that of the family bedroom.

"Well, then, by the Lord Harry, I'll not let him into the priest's room!" cried Burke indignantly. "Sure, what sort of tratement's this at all? I'm surprised at ye, Honor, that ye make no offer to stop him, an' he insultin' the visitor, an' that same your own brother an' a holy priest!"

"He's welcome to go in as far as I am concerned," said Father Casey. "Walk in, man, and look for yourself, though unless you think I have the boy packed up in my hand-bag I don't know where you'd fancy I'd have him hid."

McTavish, indeed, after one hasty glance round the small chamber, which contained nothing but a bed built into the wall, and a single chair which supported a jug and basin, was satisfied that his son could by no possibility have taken refuge there. He came back to the kitchen looking wildly about him.

"Where is my laddie?" he groaned, and then: "What in the world 'ull I do?"

Honor's face softened, and rising quickly she pushed forward her own chair.

"I declare anybody 'ud pity the man," she observed. "He doesn't rightly know what he's doing. Sit down, Mr. McTavish. Sit down now and get your breath. When was it ye lost the little boy?"

Alexander leaned on the back of the chair and looked at her dully.

"I'll tell ye no lie," he said after a pause. "It was going to chastise Hector I was, because he wouldn't make me the promise of keepin' away from this place an' all that's in it. Aye, when things got that far that he was makin' so free with him yonder"—nodding at Father Casey—"I thought it was time to make an end of it. The laddie wouldn't give in, an' I tould him I'd give him the right leatherin'."

"An' how did he get off from ye?" asked Honor.

The rest of the party sat silent, Burke surveying McTavish with indignant scorn, the priest listening with interest, and the children eyeing him with fear and dislike.

"I was holding him by the collar of his jersey," answered McTavish, finding relief in speech in spite of his distaste for his audience, "an' he slipped his arms through his sleeves an' made off up the road this way."

"Did nobody see him?" interrupted the priest. "Patsy, did you see him? You were the last to come up from the shore."

Patsy glanced up quickly and then dropped his eyes, reddening.

"I seen him," piped little Norah suddenly, "when I was standin' at the crass roads lookin' out for Father Dinny. I seen Hec lep over the dyke an' run down towards the strand!"

"Ah, ye little tell-tale!" muttered Pat vengefully. "What call have ye to go lettin' out that, the way poor Hector'll get weltd?"

"Hush, now," said Father Casey. "Speak up, Patsy, when I tell you. You must have seen him, for you were standin' on the dyke and would have a fine view. Which way did the lad run?"

"Will ye promise not to bate Hector if I tell ye?" said Patsy, turning to McTavish.

"Och, I'm not for batin' him now—there's for ye!" groaned Alexander. "Tell me the truth, that's all I ax. Was it to the strand he run?"

"He did so," rejoined Patsy unwillingly.

Alexander sprang to his feet. "I'm after him then," he cried. "It's a wild night, and the wee laddie was in a terrible takin'! The Lord send no harm come to him!"

"Amen!" cried Honor, striking her breast. Then, compassionating the father's grey face, she added reassuringly: "Ah, what harm could come to him? Doesn't that same lad play about on the shore every day of his life? Why, ye're all of a shake, ye creature, ye! Ye had a right to take a drop o' somethin' to keep the could out, anyway—— Pat!"

She nodded to her husband, who, turning without any great enthusiasm, stretched a hand towards a certain black bottle which stood on the dresser.

But Alexander waved it away and turned towards the door.

"No, thank ye—not a drop. I must go look for my lad."

The little party in the kitchen watched him as he crossed the yard, dragging his limbs with difficulty, for they were numbed by the paralysing fear which had suddenly seized him. The lad was wild when he ran away; he scarcely knew what he was doing. The wind

was raging and the tide was high. If he had run out on the rocks a big wave might easily have carried him off.

"The poor fellow!" said the priest. "It's the great bigot he seems to be. Well, what was it we were talking about before he came in?"

Patsy, with a shout of laughter, repeated the jest which had been on his uncle's lips when McTavish entered, and everyone laughed with the exception of Honor, who was still gazing out into the darkness.

"It's to be hoped that the poor little fella 'ull be all right," she said. "I'd break my heart if anything happened to him."

CHAPTER V

ROSE MCTAVISH was standing in her doorway looking anxiously out into the now deepening twilight, when she was hailed by a voice from the road:

"Rose, is that yourself, Rose? Is he found yet?"

"Who?" cried Rose. And one hand flew to her throat as though to drag away the gripping fear. Which was it—husband or son? She had been looking out for both with growing uneasiness, and neither had returned.

Honor pushed open the little gate and came rapidly towards her.

"It's Hector I'm m'anin'. McTavish was up above with us lookin' for him a while ago, but he's never set foot in our place to-day."

"He tould me it was goin' down to the shore he was," gasped Rose. "Isn't Patsy back? The two of them was together. Och, Honor!"

She clutched the other woman by the arm.

"Patsy's back this long while," said Honor breathlessly; "but Hector come away first. Och, woman, dear, it's the pity he didn't stop down along with Patsy. All this trouble wouldn't have fell out, then. Didn't ye see McTavish at all?"

"I did not—not since dinner-time. I was expectin' him in to his tay. For the Lord's sake, Honor, tell me what's the matter at all. What's happened Hector?"

"God knows what's happened him," groaned Mrs. Burke. She had entered the cottage now, and by the dim lamplight Rose saw that her bosom was heaving

and her eyes swimming with tears. "*Ochone*, wasn't he the same as my own child? I give you my word to this day he's the same to me as Patsy or little Norah. I do have the feel yet of his little head nestlin' to my breast. An' now he's destroyed on the two of us maybe, through the father losin' his senses with black bigotry!"

"What do ye mean?" whispered Rose almost inarticulately. "Honor, if there's any pity in ye, tell me the whole of it straight out."

"I didn't hear the whole of it straight myself," rejoined Honor, wiping her eyes. "My brother the priest was in it, and as far as I can make out he overtook Hector on the road strugglin' again' the wind that had him near blown over, and he offered to give him a lift on his horse, and as the two of them was ridin' along they come up again' McTavish, and by all accounts 'twas the devil's own rage he broke out in. He got some kind of outrageous notion in his head that Father Casey was carryin' off the child. He dragged the little fella down from the saddle and thrun him on the road. He gave the priest all sorts, and done the same by ourselves when he come tearin' in, a while after, to look for Hector."

"Did the child run off back to yous, then?" asked Rose with dry lips. Her blue eyes flashed angrily.

"Don't I tell you I haven't set eyes on him to-day?" rejoined Honor, angry in her turn. "The father threatened to thrash him, I b'lieve, without he promised to keep away from our place. Ah, if ye look at me that way, woman, I'll think ye as bad as himself. It's you that ought to be ashamed to look me in the face at all. Isn't it me that's been the right mother to your child? Where would he be if it wasn't for me? Ye know very well ye couldn't have r'ared him. You was that weakly ye couldn't give the child his rights—ye know well ye couldn't. And many a

time I made an excuse of one kind or another to keep him up above with myself and let him share with Patsy. I tell you straight, Rose McTavish, if Hector's the fine boy he is this day—if he's spared, God help him!—it's to me he owes it."

"Och, Honor, give over!" cried Rose, bursting into tears. "What call have ye to be crowin' over me now when I don't know whether my child is alive or dead? Where is he at all? Where did he run?"

"He give the father the slip when he was for draggin' him home to bate the life out o' him," returned Honor, and then her heart suddenly melted at the other's distress. "Och, sure he wasn't himself! 'Twas just the Ould Boy temptin' him with that mad notion! Sure, my brother only took Hector up on the horse out of good nature! Well, however it was, the poor boy run off with himself, and nobody's seen sight or light of him sence, only Patsy and Norah, that caught a glimpse of him peltin' as hard as he could towards the strand. Now don't be upsettin' yourself that way, acushla! Sure, it's only hidin' among the rocks he is, away from the father."

She put her arm round Rose, who had indeed reeled, and was now gazing up at her wild-eyed.

"Them's awful high tides we do be havin' now, but——" faltered she through chattering teeth. "And I misdoubt me he wouldn't know very well where he was goin'. Och, Honor, ye may be talkin', but he's the only child I have—my heart's in him—in him alone. I'd sooner lose the father a hundred times, so I would."

"Whisht, whisht! That's no way to be speakin'! Sure, we're all in the hands of God! Throw a bit of a shawl round you, and the two of us will go look for him. Pop a sod or two of turf on first, the way it will be warm for the child if he has got anyways wet,"

Without waiting for Rose to follow her advice, she herself darted to the hearth and piled up the sods on the sinking fire, then, taking the younger woman by the arm, she hurried with her out of the house.

They had not yet reached the stony path which led downwards to the shore, however, when they encountered McTavish himself, walking slowly towards them. He was carrying a lantern, which he held up as they approached, and by its light they could see that his face was pale and wild and his clothes drenched with spray.

"Yez may turn back," he said in a toneless voice; "ye'll no find the laddie the night. He's gone off with himself on the hooker that went back to the Island this evening."

"What's that!" exclaimed Honor, while Rose fell against her, unable to speak.

"I'm after meetin' a body that got off that same hooker and come ashore because he thought it too dangerous to be sailin' over on such a night, an' he tould me Hector was hidin' in the hold among the turf, and he begged and prayed them to take him over along with them."

"Save us and bless us!" ejaculated Honor. "Who'd ever think anybody would be mad enough to go sailin' on such an evenin' as this? I can hear the waves leppin' and roarin' from here."

As they all stood silent, holding their breath, the thunder of the surf was indeed distinctly audible even amid the rushing of the wind.

"It's blowin' towards the Island," said McTavish in a dull voice. "That'll be in their favour."

Honor uttered an inarticulate moan, and drew the folds of the petticoat which she was wearing in lieu of a shawl closer round her face.

"I'll go home and put up a prayer for him," she sobbed. "That's all any of us can do. That the Lord

may spare and watch over him this night! Amen! The Lord protect him, the poor child! Holy Mother of God, pray for him!"

Murmuring supplications, she moved away in the darkness, and McTavish took Rose by the arm.

"Ye'll come with me now, woman," said he. "Ye'll come home and do the same as that one yon. It's not for us to be behind the likes of her in faith."

"Faith, is it?" cried Rose, with an odd sound that might have been a laugh, and clapping her hands together.

Neither spoke again until they reached the cottage, when McTavish, having closed the door, stepped up to his wife, who had thrown herself into a chair and was sitting staring before her in blank misery.

"Rose, woman," he said falteringly, "ye'll kneel down with me now. Sure the Lord made the winds and the sea."

"Will you whisht?" cried Rose violently. "I'll no kneel down with ye! I'll be a hypocrite no more."

"What's that you're saying?" cried McTavish. And he seized her by the shoulders, his eyes gleaming.

"I'm sayin' it's hypocrites we've been the both of us till now, and I'm sick of it. There's my wee laddie in his death-grapple this minute very like, and it's you has drove him to it. Sure if he did consort with Papists, is it worse nor what yourself's been doin' this twenty year? Is it worse nor what you've forced me to do? Ye know it isn't. If them Burkes is Papists they don't pretend to be anythin' else; it's you yoursel' that's been actin' a lie and makin' me do the same."

McTavish loosed his grip of her shoulders and let his arms drop by his sides. He made no attempt to speak, and she continued breathlessly:

"Ye know as well as me there's not a time I go in yon church yonder but it's again' my conscience. Ye

know every time I take the Communion I feel I'm as bad as Judas—aye, and it's what ye're feelin' yoursel' in your heart, though you won't let on. Wasn't all the McTavishes Presbyterians as far back as ye can count? Wasn't my own father an elder? I mind well the words he said to me when I took my token from his hand. 'Be true to your releegion, Rose,' said he, 'else you're no daughter of mine.' If he'd been alive when ye axed me he'd not have let me be over-persuaded; but I was alone in the world, an' you took advantage o' me."

McTavish gazed at her, his sandy beard wagging as his face worked.

"'Twasn't by choice I changed my place o' worship," he said presently. "Ye know yourself there's no meeting-house within twenty mile o' this place. I'd never have left Belfast if I could have got my health in the mills. The Almighty wouldn't hold that up again' me. I had to take what offered. And the master's a good Protestant if he is an Episcopalian."

"The master's the same as the rest o' us—doin' what suits his pocket," rejoined Rose bitterly. "The mistress does, anyway. Didn't ye tell me yourself, when he first brought home the mistress, that she had a prayer-table in her room and a cross on it and two candlesticks? Sure the Pope o' Rome could do no worse! I mind your tellin' me about it the first time ye cleaned the windows after she come. It was scandalised enough you were then."

"Och, well, she put the whole of them away soon enough," said Alexander. "Och, woman, this is foolish talk ye have, and it's ill for us to be arguin' with our only son the way he is. Come here now, an' kneel down fornenst me. Ye'll drive my senses from me out and out if ye sit glowerin' at me with those wicked thoughts in your heart."

He took her by the shoulders and sought to force her to her knees.

"Och, what's the use?" groaned Rose. "I daren't kneel down, and that's the truth. What kind o' prayer can I say—me that's made a mock o' my releegion all they years? The Lord's chastisin' me for it now. Aye, man, ye can hear the roarin' of the sea from here. How could any boat come safe to land? Our wee laddie's drowned by now or dashed to pieces again' the rocks."

Alexander stood swaying and wringing his hands. The sweat was pouring down his face. All at once he cried out with a loud and terrible voice:

"If ye'll no pray, woman, ye can hearken to the prayer I'm offerin' up. I'll go bail it'll be heard."

He threw himself upon his knees and stretched out his arms, looking upwards the while with fixed, shining eyes. So might some Covenanter of old have prayed upon the stony hillside that was soon to be crimsoned with his blood.

✧ "O Lord Almighty," prayed Alexander, "hear me now, for I'm repentant of my past sin. I swear now upon my knees that if Ye'll save my only son from the devourin' waves and send him back to me safe and well, I will leave this place and take him where he can be brought up in the faith of his fathers. So help me, God, Amen!"

His wife had risen to her feet; her recent mood of excitement and passionate resentment had fallen from her, and she stood now looking fearfully down at her man.

"Whisht, McTavish!" she cried in a low, anxious voice. "For pity's sake mind what you're sayin'! Don't be makin' promises that way that ye can't keep."

McTavish turned slowly towards her on his knees, suffering his extended arms to drop gradually.

"You accused me out o' your own mouth, and what ye cast up at me was true. I've been liar and traitor

in one. I've let my son make friends with them he should have shunned, and if he's in danger now 'tis because he was used to make free wi' them he should have stood off from; but if the Lord spares him I'll take him back to his own people, I'll see he's l'arned what he should be l'arned. I'll keep him safe from this out. It's back to Belfast we'll go if the laddie's give back to us."

"Och, man yon's havers—sure, I didn't rightly mean what I said—sure, you shouldn't be takin' me up that way and me distracted! If ye didn't get your health in Belfast when ye were twenty years younger it'll be worse now. What 'ud ye do in Belfast, anyway—you that's used to gardenin'?"

"I can go back and work in the mill," said McTavish grimly.

"And be choked with the fluff in your lungs and the bad air," cried Rose, turning pale.

Not an hour before she had spoken slightly of her husband, belittling the affection she felt for him in comparison to that she bestowed on Hector; but now a passion stronger than anything which had hitherto held sway over her somewhat shallow nature gripped her heart, as she gazed at the rugged man to whom she was joined by so many inextricable ties of love and toil and sorrow, and who stood ready to cut the threads, not only of that union, but of life itself, in obedience to his principles. She crept up to him and laid a tremulous hand on his arm.

"Husband, I didn't mean it," she faltered. "Don't be sayin' thon things."

"Nothin' you can say now would make any differ," rejoined Alexander, looking at her sternly. "Don't be takin' too much blame to yoursel' or too much credit to yoursel' either. 'Twas your words that opened my eyes. But it's my own word that binds me; and I'll stick to it, so help me, God!"

CHAPTER VI

Hector, always fleet of foot, ran on, leaving his father, more swiftly than he had ever run in his life. Fear, anger, and the passionate determination to have his own way all combined to lend him wings. It was without any definite intention that he had turned in the direction of the shore, but as he caught sight of the Burke children when he passed them in his head-long flight, the idea occurred to him that among the rocks where they had all been playing he could best escape pursuit. There were many crannies in which he could hide from his father's eyes, and even if discovered he knew the latter could not hope to emulate his own daring and dexterity. Patsy himself could not overtake him when they raced from rock to rock. He could "dodge" his father until the latter, worn out, would be forced to capitulate.

But when he reached the rock-bound inlet towards which he was bending his steps—a sheltered spot protected from the wind, which was blowing off-shore—he caught sight of something which evoked a new and daring plan of action. There, securely enclosed in the little cove, and pitching slightly with the rise and fall of the water, was a small hooker loaded with turf and destined no doubt for one of the Aran Islands. The sails were furled and the craft deserted; the crew were no doubt refreshing themselves yonder in the village. Hector, after a cautious survey, descended rapidly to the water's edge, and, splashing through the surf, climbed on board.

He paused a moment on the swaying deck, and then crept down into the hold. In preparation for expected stress of weather, the stack of turf with which this was loaded had been covered with an old sheet of tarpaulin. Hector, cautiously lifting one end of it, crept beneath and lay close against the turf, occupying an inconceivably small space. He had taken the precaution to leave himself a channel for air, and lay for some time peering through it on the look-out for the owners of the little vessel. But for a long time nothing happened, and at last the boy's heart ceased to throb with so much violence, and, lulled by the warmth and the swaying motion, he fell asleep.

He was awakened by a sense of suffocation accompanied by divers hard knocks on various portions of his person, and at the same time became aware of an excited voice speaking loudly in Irish.

Hector had picked up a few words of this language from Patsy and his other playmates, and realised that someone was complaining of the difficulty of keeping the turf in place, and endeavouring at the same time to strap down the tarpaulin more tightly. He ran, in fact, the double danger of being seriously hurt by the man, who, failing to understand the nature of the excrescence beneath the tarpaulin, was endeavouring to flatten it into the required shape, and of being definitely smothered when the sheet in question was battened down.

He shrieked aloud, kicking out vigorously at the same time, and the man, dropping the corner of the tarpaulin, sat back, gaping, as Hector's head and face emerged.

"What's that?" he cried in Gaelic, hastily making the sign of the cross as he spoke.

Hector, crawling out, saw by the light of a swinging lantern three faces staring down at him, and hastened to offer an explanation. When, a little unwillingly—for

it hurt his pride to tell of his disgrace—he made clear to them that he was endeavouring to escape the thrashing promised by his father, he was relieved to find that they took his exploit in good part.

“Come up here, mabouchal,” said one of them, extending a hand and hauling him on deck. “Is this the first time ye’ve been on a boat?”

“It is so,” replied Hector; and his eyes began to dance in the flickering light. “But it isn’t for the want o’ longing to be on one. Eh, man, I’m fain to be at sea, I am that!”

“Ye’ll have a right taste o’ the sea to-night then,” said his new friend with a hoarse chuckle. “I myself have never been out in such a gale, but it’ll be grand to run before it to Inishmaan.”

“Aye, will it,” agreed another, “if we don’t go to the bottom. I reckon it foolishness to venture across on such a night as this.”

He had dropped into Gaelic again, and the other answered in the same tongue.

“What’s to be will be! As well perish on the water as be killed with the cold and hunger. But yourself knows there’s not a bit of turf left, and how would we cook our food, let alone keep ourselves warm?”

Hector, sitting cross-legged on the deck, gazed from one to the other. Even in the uncertain light he could see they had been drinking; but, indeed, the thickness of their speech had already betrayed the fact to him. In one respect this state of affairs favoured Hector’s plan, since two of them at least had reached that particular stage of intoxication which is not only good-natured but optimistic, and, moreover, tends to accept unquestioningly the trend of any event which occurs; otherwise they might have been disposed to demur at the sudden appearance of their stowaway, or to ask themselves what was to be done when they landed him,

presumably without friends or money, on the island. Even the third man, though he continued to murmur under his breath, was too far gone to trouble his mind in any way about Hector. The other occupants of that rickety hooker, in fact, were as reckless of the possible consequences of the boy's freak as he was himself. Hector had no personal qualms; he was unfortunately too well used to seeing the neighbours in an inebriated condition to feel either disgust or fear, and he had not thought of formulating any plan of action beyond that of escaping from immediate chastisement.

Nevertheless, when the hooker steered clear of the protecting influence of the mainland and began to toss violently on the open sea, he glanced with some terror at his companions, and it occurred to him that men in such a plight were not perhaps best calculated to guide a craft in a gale.

A similar thought seemed to strike the man who had already protested. Staggering across the deck, he laid his hand on the tiller.

"Let you take us back at once, Fergus," he shouted. "Let you take us back to the point! Sure it's throwing our lives away we'll be, if we venture further in this storm with a drunken man at the helm and ourselves no better."

"Let you stop that whillabaloo, Peter," retorted Fergus, pushing him away. "You heard what I said awhile back—landin' at Inishmaan is what I'll do this night—my hand and word to it. I promised the woman of the house she should have turf for her pot this night, and have it she shall."

"I'll wreck the boat on you then," bellowed the other. "It's as well we were in the sea first as last, and while we are near the coast there's a chance of being able to swim ashore."

Again he grasped for the tiller, and the two men

grappled. Hector screamed aloud, and the third man, sobered by the imminence of their danger, rushed to the rescue.

Tripping up the last speaker and kneeling on him so as to hold him down, he shouted a variety of injunctions to Fergus; and presently, to Hector's mingled relief at escaping from the threatened catastrophe and disappointment at the apparent reversal of his hope, the vessel put back towards the cove. On arriving within measurable distance of the shore the leader of the crew dragged Peter to his feet, and, to Hector's horror, throwing his arms about him, lifted him and flung him overboard.

Whether Peter was sobered by the sudden immersion, or whether the Fates which presided at his birth had decreed he was ultimately to be hanged, is uncertain, but to the boy's immense satisfaction he saw him swim out for a few strokes, and then, reaching his depth, wade towards the shore.

Their subsequent voyage to Inishmaan was one which long haunted Hector, waking and sleeping. Overhead the stormy sky with a pale moon peering ever and anon through scudding clouds; beneath him the heaving sea, now tossing their flimsy barque high on the apex of a mountainous billow, now dropping it into a precipitous trough; every now and then a breaker all but wrecking them, and the surf dashing over the craft, filling the boy's mouth and ears, and wetting him to the skin.

At an early stage in the proceedings he had been lashed to the mast, so that even had he been able to swim he had no chance of escaping from the vessel should she founder in the waves. All about him was a turmoil of sound: the waves hissing and roaring, the winds shrieking, every timber in the crazy little boat creaking, and his comrades every now and then

making the night more hideous by tipsy laughter and song. It was perhaps well for Hector that shortly before they effected their perilous landing on the island a particularly violent buffet from a breaking wave fairly "knocked him silly," as the phrase goes, and he lost consciousness.

When he opened his eyes at last it was to struggle against a choking sensation that made him for a moment imagine that he was still at sea and smothered by a breaking wave, but presently he realised that the liquor which was pouring down his throat, and which he was instinctively fighting against, was hot and exceedingly strong; it was, in fact, a jorum of poteen punch, and the mouthful or two which he had unconsciously swallowed had had the desired effect. He sat up, striking out with his stiffened limbs, and looked about him. He found himself on a table, stark naked except for a woman's red flannel petticoat which had been wrapped about him, surrounded by half a dozen people, all of whom were talking excitedly in Gaelic. The man who had so resolutely taken command on board the hooker, Brian by name, was standing by the hearth, his wet clothes steaming in the glow of a curiously acrid-smelling fire, while steam issued also from the wooden naggin which he held in his hand, and which presumably contained the same stimulating beverage as that which his wife had been administering to Hector. He appeared to be carrying on a somewhat angry colloquy with an old woman, evidently his mother from her likeness to himself, who broke off her rapid flow of speech every now and then to gaze fiercely at the stowaway.

"Drink another little sup, avick," said the younger woman, proffering the wooden mug to Hector; then, as he shook his head, "Tell us, now, what was it you were doin' at all on board the hooker."

She spoke in English, with a curious accent unlike that to which Hector was accustomed.

"I was hidin' from my father," said Hector, and as he spoke he looked towards the old woman.

"Isn't that what I told you?" cried Brian, also addressing her. "It was a child's trick, nothing else."

"The dear knows who his father is," said the old woman in Gaelic, and once more her threatening glance swept the boy. "Brian Dhu, is there any sense in that tale you have? That the boy rose up out of the middle of the boat when you were out at sea, with never a word to say how he got there nor what he wants to do now he's here among us? It's for no good he's here, an' so I tell you, I that am your mother. It's not a right child he is. Look at the queer light eyes of him, and mind how he pushed away the good drink."

"Och, mother, the little fellow is alive and natural enough," put in Brian's wife. "Would he be fainting if he was one of them ones? And see here, the red mark he has on his arms where the ropes caught him."

"Mind there isn't a red mark on your own child, Sheila," cried the old woman, turning on her now with flashing eyes. "Last night I heard him give three groans—aye, did I, and him lying in the bed with his face to the wall. Let you take care that this child from the sea isn't sent to take his place."

"The Lord forbid!" cried Sheila, hastily making the sign of the cross. Then she appeared to rally her common sense and turned to Brian, whose own expression had changed at his mother's last words.

"Yerra, Brian, sure you wouldn't dread the like of that? Didn't Father Murphy speak about those things from the altar?"

"Father Murphy s a young man," interrupted the crone. "It's myself have seen the queer things happen

long before he was born, and the fear is on me that something not right will happen now if you keep that strange child under this roof. See how wickedly he looks at me."

Hector, who, though he only understood a word here and there of their discourse, realised that the woman of the house was objecting to his presence, was not unnaturally gazing at her with some resentment.

"I want my own clothes," he said in the pause which ensued.

"Sure they're dryin' by the fire, dear. Keep this round ye now, it's nice and warm. Could ye ate a bit?"

"I could," rejoined Hector heartily.

"That's natural enough," said Sheila, in Irish, as she went towards the hearth. "And him wanting the clothes is natural. Those ones doesn't be feeling heat or cold, they say—them that believes in them," she added hastily.

Taking a wooden trencher from the dresser, she poured out a plentiful helping of Indian-meal stirabout, and filling another bowl with new milk brought them to the lad.

The old woman, too, approached and stood over him menacingly as Hector grasped the platter.

"Bless yourself first," she commanded.

Hector, gripping the spoon, gazed up at her frowningly.

"I can't do that," said he.

"What does he say?" queried the old woman in Irish.

Her daughter-in-law hesitatingly translated the boy's speech.

"What did I say?" cried she triumphantly. "Brian," she vociferated, turning to her son, who had dropped on to a settle and was now stupidly nodding over his

empty cup, "I ask you, Brian, how dare you bring a creature like this into the house with your own child—into my house no less? The only thing you can do now is to throw that one out and drive it from your door."

As Brian gazed at her without moving, Sheila intervened:

"Och, mother, let you have patience for a minute—sure, maybe he didn't understand. I'm only axin' ye to make the sign of the cross, avick," turning to Hector. "I want ye to bless yourself the way the bit ye ate will agree with ye." She took the spoon from Hector's hand and endeavoured to raise it to his forehead, but the boy drew back fiercely.

"I won't do that, then," he cried. "My father bid me never do such a thing."

"What's that he says," queried the mistress of the house, as even Sheila stepped back appalled.

"He says his father bid him never do it," faltered she.

"His father," repeated her mother-in-law, clapping her hands together. "The minute he was carried into the house I had a suspicion of who his father was. It's not so much as a fairy child he is, but worse. Look at that hair of his rising up all round his head the same as flames. 'Tis a young devil he is! Out of the house with him. Here, Brian, I say, you that carried him in may throw him out. Fergus, you're in it too—lend a hand."

"I would not like to be touching him," said Fergus suddenly.

Hector, recognising a familiar word in the old woman's rapid speech, indignantly announced

"I'm not a divil, then—my father's the Minister's gardener—sure how could I be crossin' myself like the Catholics?"

In those days the Gaelic League had not penetrated

to Inishmaan, and the inhabitants had not become familiarised with any people who, though kindred to them in race, and often in degree, were aliens in religion. Sheila could make nothing of this speech, but she looked hesitatingly towards her mother-in-law and murmured:

"The boy says his father's a gardener, and he's different from the Catholics on the mainland."

"I believe you," shouted the other. "He's that different that I'll not have him with us another minute—my curse on you, Brian, for bringing bad luck in with him, and us with more troubles nor we can carry already. I'll put him out myself if you won't."

She caught up the crooked bar of iron which was used for drawing the sods of turf together and strode towards the boy, who leaped from the table and rushed from the open door, dropping the petticoat on the threshold.

"Look at that now," cried the crone triumphantly; "he couldn't stand the sight of iron. Pitch his clothes out after him and shut the door."

Fergus picked up the still wet garments which lay steaming before the fire, and flung them over the threshold. He closed the door hastily and came back, making the sign of the cross as he did so.

"It's my belief that you were right, ma'am," he said. "It's towards the Dun he ran—he belongs to them ones as sure as I'm alive."

CHAPTER VII

AN hour later all was quiet in Brian McMorrough's cabin; the guests had departed, the old woman had retired to the narrow room to the left of the kitchen which she shared with her only grandchild, and Sheila was lying by her husband's side in the opposite chamber. Her eyes were wide open; her ears strained to catch every sound; her heart, softened to a tenderness even beyond that natural to women by the untimely loss of five out of her six children, ached, as she thought of the little lad driven forth hungry and naked to face the fierce blast and the dark strange night. She seemed still to feel the pressure of his bony bare shoulders against her encircling arm—how often had she supported just such little shoulders, when one after another of her sons had leaned against her struggling for breath.

"Who knows if that little fella will be alive in the morning!" she sighed to herself.

Then she sat up cautiously. Brian was sound asleep, and through the thin partitions she could hear her mother-in-law's sonorous snores which seemed to make the very rafters ring.

She crept out of bed and into the kitchen, guided by the light of the winking turf fire; a sod or two of the new supply had been added to the primitive and odoriferous fuel which had served their needs throughout the day. The storm seemed to have abated in some measure, and even as she stood hesitating, the outline of the door was defined by a brilliant flood of moon-

light. Stealthily creeping towards it on her bare feet she set it open, and beheld to her dismay a small dark heap lying just beyond the threshold.

"The creature didn't come back for his clothes itself," she murmured; "the old body frightened the life out of him. It's perished entirely he'll be."

She went out, walking on tiptoe, and picking up the clothes, which were still wet, re-entered the house and spread them out before the fire; then taking down Hector's untasted platter of porridge from the dresser shelf she set that too by the kindly glow, and crouching on her heels by the hearth she waited.

"It's doing no harm I am," she said to herself, choking down sundry qualms. "I have the priest's word that it isn't right to be giving in to *pishroques*; I'd have that child's blood on my head if I was to let him lie out there, hungry and bare, and never rise a hand to help him."

She stretched out her hand now, turning the plate so that its contents might be warmed on the other side, and then picking up Hector's shirt and trousers shook them out before the blaze.

"Not so much as a jacket or a bawneen," she whispered to herself. "I must give him the loan of my petticoat again."

After a few minutes she rose, the little garments being if not thoroughly dry at least warmed through, and rolling them up in the petticoat which still lay across the stool where Fergus had thrown it on closing the door, and further providing herself with the stir-about and the bowl of milk which the hapless Hector had not been allowed to quaff, stole out into the night, carefully closing the door behind her.

"The Lord stand between us and all harm," she breathed to herself.

That was indeed a ghostly world into which she now

penetrated, the wet and rocky ground over which she sped shining with all manner of flickering gleams as the uncertain moonlight caught it; the wind, whose tempestuous fury had abated as has been said, still uttered low moaning sounds, and there were shadows everywhere.

At last she found herself close to the Dun, or ancient fort, towards which poor Hector had fled in his desperation, and as she paused, setting down her burden, to make the sign of the cross, the moon emerging from a white tumbled mass of clouds flooded the place with light. Her heart stood still as she descried a white shape huddled on the bank a few paces away from her. Then she chid herself for her folly.

"Is that yourself?" she called softly. "Is that you, little stranger?"

"It is me," said Hector, crouching down lower and sobbing; "I want my clothes."

"I've brought them, darlin', an' I have my ould petticoat here to keep the life in you; an' I have a bit for you to ate as well. But put on the clothes first, avick, else the could 'ull have you perished."

Hector obeyed, and suffered his new friend to wrap the petticoat about him; then he held out his hands eagerly for the porridge.

Sheila reluctantly allowed him to take the platter from her and sighed to herself as he began to eat.

"What sort of a boy are you at all," she said, "that you wouldn't bless yourself first?"

Hector set the plate by his side and looked up; she could see by his expression that he was ashamed.

"I'll not cross myself," he said, "because that's no a fit thing for a Protestant to do, but I ought to say my grace."

He closed his eyes and joined his hands and prayed for a moment to himself, the woman watching him.

Presently he opened his eyes and fell to work at his stirabout.

"Listen now, little stranger," said Sheila, after a moment, "I've h'ard o' Protestants over on the mainland, but they does be gentry mostly—I've never come across one myself, but I'd like to ax you this one thing: isn't it a Christian you are of some sort?"

Hector paused with his spoon poised in the air.

"Of course I'm a Christian," he rejoined indignantly; "it's yous that isn't," he added to himself, but in a low voice, for after all the woman had been kind.

"Well, listen here now," pursued she; "if you're any sort of Christian you believe the Lord died on a cross to save us?"

Hector gravely nodded.

"Well, then," resumed she, "isn't it a queer thing you wouldn't think it right to make the Holy Sign whatever you'd be doin'?"

Hector cogitated, but the point was beyond him.

"I can't go again' what my father said," he rejoined.

"Well, well, poor little fella," said Sheila, sighing again.

Then she bade him hurry up and finish his meal, for there'd be the dear knew what shindy if her absence were discovered.

"Am I not to come back with you, then?" asked Hector wistfully.

"Ah, now, darlin', I darn't let ye; the ould woman would kill me—but I'll show ye where ye can hide till the night's past, an' I'll—I'll be thinkin' where I can take you in the mornin'."

Hector polished off the remainder of the food and drank the milk; then having said his grace he rose.

"Is it to a house you're bringing me?" he inquired in a shaking voice. "It's awful lonesome being out in the dark."

"Och, it's a house, alanna, but there's nobody in it—don't you be afeard—it'll only be for a few hours—sure the night's half over now, and I'll come for you before the sun's up. Sure, no harm will happen you now you're after sayin' your prayers. I'm afeard none of the neighbours would let you into their houses no more than my mother-in-law, because of that notion they have of your bringin' bad luck with ye. But it's a grand safe place I'm bringin' ye to, where nobody 'ud think of lookin' for ye."

Holding him by the hand she had led him past the ruins of an ancient church, no other than the renowned Kilcananagh, and on for a hundred yards or so, pausing at length before another ruin. This was built of dry stones, its most remarkable feature being a deep doorway, on the lintel of which Hector observed a heap of straw.

"There now," said Sheila in a cheerful tone, "ye'll sleep as sound as the bellows on that. It's what I brought myself for a poor old body that had no other place to lay his head. By the greatest good luck the wind's behind this place, and ye'll be able to keep yourself warm."

Hector looked about him. This ruin seemed to him a very ghostly place, and he fancied he saw, at some little distance near the chapel, stone slabs which were suspiciously like tombstones. He clutched at Sheila's hand as she sought to drag it away, but she feigned to ignore his terror.

"Wait till I shake up your bed for ye," she said cheerfully. "It's grand straw, as dry as anything—them ould walls is wonderful thick. Now let go my hand and lie down. That's right, there you are now—snuggle down in it and I'll cover you up with the petticoat. Comfort, comfort, may I never offend you! Sleep sound and I'll come for you in a little while."

"I'm afeard," said poor Hector, with chattering teeth.

"Afeard is it? Och, that's no way to be talkin'! Wasn't it saints entirely that used to be livin' in this little house—won't they take care of you? And it won't be any time before I'm back with ye; but I must be off or it's myself that will be gettin' into trouble."

Hector listened to the patter of her bare feet, until the sound, growing fainter in the distance, was drowned by the beating of his own heart.

Many a time as he tossed on his straw bed, or sat up quaking to listen to the eerie sounds of the night, did he regret his own folly; he thought resentfully of the wild people who had given him so scant a welcome, even of Sheila, who, though she had fed and clad him, had brought him to this strange place and left him alone in the dark. Then the things they had said of him; the odd looks they had cast at him—if he had stayed a moment longer they might have hurt him very much.

"I wisht I'd never come," sighed Hector, and then he added with a heartfelt groan, "I wisht it was to Mammy Burke's I'd gone!"

Honor would have known how to protect him even against the wrath of his father; not like that other woman yonder who would only take his part by stealth.

In spite of his fears and of the indignation which is even more powerful to banish sleep, the lad did at last fall into a doze, from which he woke in alarm as a hand grasped his shoulder.

"Get up," said Sheila's voice, "get up and come along with me now; I'm goin' to take ye where ye'll be well looked after."

The dim light of dawn showed him grey rocks, a grey sky with just a dim pearly radiance at the horizon;

grey-green bent sighing in the wind; it was a dreary world to wake up to, and the child shivered.

"Will I be able to get home to-day?" he inquired anxiously.

"I question if you will," rejoined his companion; "the wind seems to be gettin' up again, and I don't think the hookers 'ull dar' go acrast. You must have patience till the storm passes over. Hurry now, for I've no wish to be missed."

She seized the boy's hand and he trotted by her side in a very melancholy mood; she halted at last before a thatched house, at the entrance of a straggling village, of somewhat better appearance than the rest.

"Who lives here?" inquired Hector quickly.

"Nobody you'd know," rejoined his guide; "but they're dacent people, and there's one stoppin' there now that 'ull be a good friend to you."

She knocked once or twice at the door, and after some delay steps were heard within and a woman's voice inquired who was there.

"God save you, Mrs. Cavan. Is his Reverence up yet?"

"He is not. Is it a sick call?"

"It is not, but let you ask the holy man to step here. I'm anxious to speak to him."

The steps moved away, and presently the door opened and a young man stood on the threshold, wrapped in a heavy frieze coat. Sheila immediately bobbed a curtsy and entered into a hurried explanation in Gaelic, of which Hector failed to catch the import, but from the woman's manner and her frequent interpolations of such expressions as "noble person" and "your honour," gathered that he was in the presence of some important personage. Finally the young man turned to him.

"Well, my little fellow, you must stop here for the

present," he said in English; "we'll do what we can for you, and I'll send you across to your parents as soon as I hear of a hooker going to the mainland. Meanwhile you'll be all right with me."

He beckoned him within the doorway, and Sheila murmuring a shower of blessings in Gaelic took her departure.

Hector's new friend closed the door and desired him to sit down on a stool by the hearth.

The woman of the house was already drawing together the sods of turf and blowing at them; and sparks and presently a blaze leaped forth. An old man came in meanwhile from the adjoining room, thrusting his arms into the sleeves of his bawneen as he did so.

"Give this boy his breakfast," said Hector's protector, in Gaelic. "Look after him while I dress myself."

"Surely your Reverence need not get up so early," rejoined the woman. "The people round about will not be expecting it. It would be a pity if any of them were late."

"I will keep to the time arranged," returned he. "I could not sleep now, so it is useless for me to go back to bed."

He went into a room on the left of the kitchen, and Hector stared about him, noticing that though the day had not yet dawned, the place appeared to be swept and garnished, and that there was an indefinable air of expectation about the inhabitants.

They, in their turn, looked at him curiously, and the woman with some slight hostility; it was evident that she had overheard and disapproved of something in Sheila's hurried communication.

She cut off a wedge from a brown griddle cake which she presented to the boy, together with a naggin

of buttermilk. Then she set the door wide open, and the pale light of the growing day mingled with the glow of the fire.

As Hector ate, he noticed that the woman of the house looked forth inquiringly every now and then, and presently footsteps drew near the house, the footsteps of several people; and the boy, craning his neck, observed that the island folk were indeed gathering in little knots about the house, which they did not seek to enter, preferring, it seemed, to stand about talking together in hushed voices.

All at once the old man before mentioned came out of the room on the right, leaving the door ajar, and Hector perceived that in full view of the kitchen stood a table covered with a white cloth on which stood a crucifix flanked by two candlesticks. The old man, passing him, opened a drawer in the dresser, and took out two candles, which he set in the candlesticks, speaking in Gaelic the while to some other occupant of the inner room. He was answered by and by in very weak and muffled tones, presumably those of an old woman; then the door closed and Hector was left to wonder. He finished his breakfast, and after a time got off the stool and looked out.

Quite a number of people had collected by this time, and the boy noticed that though for the most part they were standing, a few women were kneeling and appeared to be praying devoutly. Among these he recognised Sheila, who had performed her toilet with great care, her hair being smoothed away neatly under the collar of her cloak, while the hem of a new petticoat peeped from beneath the folds of the same garment; she was wearing stockings and pampooties and was scrupulously clean.

Hector smiled at her, but she made no sign of recognition, and while he stood gaping a hand was laid on his

shoulder and he turned round. Beside him stood the young man to whom Sheila had confided him, dressed in black and wearing the round collar which Hector had only seen priests wear. He gazed at him startled, and the other, divining his thoughts, smiled.

"Yes, I am a priest, my lad," he said, "but I won't eat you; on the contrary, I intend to take care of you. Have you had a good breakfast?"

Hector nodded.

"Well now, you must go and sit in there, and keep very quiet. I'm holding a Station in this house for a poor sick woman, and the neighbours have come to hear Mass and go to their duties—come, what are you staring at? You've heard of Stations on the mainland, haven't you?"

"I have," rejoined Hector, "but I'm thinkin' I oughtn't to be here."

"True for you," said the priest, with a little laugh; "and I wouldn't have you here if I could help it, for I think you are likely to give me a good deal of trouble. But we can't turn you out to perish with cold and hunger, and from what Mrs. McMorrough tells me, that's what would happen if I didn't look after you. And maybe worse," he added gloomily, and then he sighed.

"My father bid me have nothin' to do with priests," said Hector falteringly.

His interlocutor, a pale, keen-featured young man, looked at him sharply and then smiled again.

"I think under present circumstances your father would stretch a point," he said. "Since you are so scrupulous I wonder you should have run away from him."

Hector had no answer to this, and the priest, taking him by the hand, opened the door of his own room, pushed him gently in, and then, to his surprise and

alarm, shot the primitive bolt which made it fast from the outside.

Hector looked about him, observing with relief that this room, unlike the kitchen, which was lighted only from either of the two doors opposite each other which opened directly into the air, possessed a window. A small window, it is true, and hermetically sealed, but still giving sufficient light to enable him to take stock of his surroundings. These were few and in no way remarkable: the bed, in which the priest had slept; the basin standing on a chair, in which he had washed; the frieze overcoat, in which he had been wrapped on first coming to the door, and which now hung suspended from a nail in the wall, and a pair of boots.

Having seen everything there was to be seen in the room, Hector turned his attention to what was going on without; but his only window looked upon a shelving mass of rock—the house presumably being built in its close proximity for the sake of shelter; every now and then the face of some curious bystander would darken the panes for a moment and then be withdrawn; he could hear the trampling of feet and the murmur of voices without, and after a time voices sounded in the adjacent kitchen—very low voices these. Hector thought to distinguish the tones of the priest, and there never seemed to be more than one person in colloquy with him. The outer door opened and closed frequently, and steps crossed and recrossed the kitchen, the steps apparently of only one person. The boy could make nothing of it; strain his ears as he might, he could not distinguish a word. As a matter of fact, the island folk were going to confession.

By and by, however, he heard the voice of the old man of the house loudly uplifted in what was evidently a summons to the congregation outside, for immediately afterwards there was a great trampling and shuffling

in the house itself. Hector, urged by curiosity, peered through a chink above the hinge of the door of communication, and could see that the kitchen was thronged with people, who presently sank on their knees. He could see the gleam of candlelight from the inner room, and for a moment caught sight of the priest's figure robed in white, in the act of pinning what seemed to him a crimson scarf upon his arm. Then a head intervened between his peephole and the inner room and he saw no more.

A great hush seemed to fall upon the place, broken only by the murmuring voice of the priest; then there was silence; then the voice resumed, and, of a sudden, came the tinkle of a little bell.

Somehow or other the strangeness of it all, the hush, the mystery, coupled with the views Hector had so often heard his father express, wrought upon the lad, and his uneasiness culminated when the unexpected sound of the bell fell upon his ears. A wild terror seized him. What was he doing there, he, Hector McTavish? He must escape at any cost!

The bell sounded again, and there was a movement in the next room, a sudden rustle and stir, something like that which might be produced by a field of corn in bending before a rushing wind. The solution was simple enough could Hector have realised it; the packed congregation was simply gathering itself together, people were bending their bodies and striking their breasts at the approach of the most solemn portion of the rite. Some among them even groaned and sobbed, and Hector, hearing, seized one of the boots which lay near the bed and with two or three resolute taps broke the window. He squeezed himself through the aperture at the cost of a few scratches from the fragments of glass which still adhered to the casement, and clambering out on the rocks fled like the wind.

CHAPTER VIII

THE storm which had raged ceaselessly for more than sixty hours had abated at last, though there was still a strong ground-swell, which with the threatening aspect of the weather seemed likely to baulk McTavish's design of chartering a curragh and proceeding in search of his son. There was another obstacle in the way, the nature of which he did not at once realise. News of the disaster which had befallen him had been quickly spread among the neighbours, who had not been slow to dilate on the original cause of the father's indignation and the child's flight. As exaggeration is seldom wanting under such circumstances, the inhabitants of Cloonna-hinch learnt that Alexander had grossly insulted Honor Burke's brother, a holy priest, and had, moreover, so grievously ill-treated his only son that the child, maddened with fear and pain, had thrown himself into the sea, from which he had been with difficulty rescued and conveyed for greater safety to one of the Aran Islands.

In vain did poor Alexander plead and threaten in turn, even stifling his thrifty northern conscience to the extent of offering sums which to him were quite fabulous in extent to anyone who would consent to convey him to the island. People either made some evasive answer or turned away sullenly without answering at all. One or two indeed advised him to go to Galway and take the steamer from there on the morrow; and when Alexander, wringing his hands, declared that the boy had been already absent nearly three days, and

that no one could tell into whose hands he had fallen or whether he was being fed or cared for, his interlocutor had replied harshly that he had a right to have thought of that "afore he druv the little fella away and maybe he was in as good hands as he was likely to be at home."

He was returning from the shore, thoroughly worn out and disconsolate, when he encountered Patsy Burke running quickly to meet him.

"Have ye got a boat yet, Mr. McTavish?" asked he breathlessly.

Everyone in the neighbourhood knew of McTavish's quest.

"I have not," said Alexander wearily.

"Then my Da said I was to tell ye he knew where to borry one for ye, an' if ye could take an oar yourself he'll find a few more an' himself will lend a hand."

"I'm very thankful," said Alexander, and his face flushed with joy and eagerness. "How soon could he start, d'ye think?"

"He said he'd see about it at wanst. Do you go home an' get a bit to ate an' I'll come fetch ye the minute he's ready."

In less than half an hour the boy returned, telling McTavish that his father and "the rest o' them" had gone down to the shore and would be ready to start as soon as he came.

Alexander hastened down the stony track with Patsy scampering in front and descried a little knot of people standing in the cove; the coracle, a primitive boat made of tarpaulin stretched round bent ribs of wood, was already launched, and Patrick Burke was standing awaiting his approach and leaning on the oar with which he would presently steer.

Alexander having climbed in, walked cautiously to his place, and one of the men already sitting in the

boat handed him the oar which it was intended he should use; as McTavish took it from him he raised his eyes mechanically to his face and was startled by something oddly familiar in his expression. This man wore an oilskin cap pulled down over his brows, and an ordinary fisherman's jersey, but the gardener's glance running quickly over his figure, discovered that the trousers which he wore were of black cloth. Then his eyes went back to the face and recognition came to him.

"It's the priest!" he exclaimed, and stood up in his place so that the boat rocked dangerously. He had not closed his eyes for three nights, and between anxiety on his son's account and the searchings of conscience which had pursued him ceaselessly since Hector's loss, he had reached such a pitch of nervous excitement that he scarcely knew what he was doing. It seemed to him now that it would be tempting Providence to set forth on this expedition with one whose company he had sworn to shun.

"I don't agree to him going," he cried tremulously. "It's what I didn't expect an' what I'll not allow."

"Well, that bates all!" cried Patrick Burke, and he, too, rose in his place, so that the fragile craft was for a moment in considerable danger.

"Sit down," said Father Casey, authoritatively, "sit down, Pat. Don't be paying attention to the man at all; he doesn't know what he's saying! He's more than half daft, poor fellow."

Burke unwillingly resumed his place in the stern, but two other men rose in turn and got out.

"It's no use, your Reverence," said one, in reply to the priest's protest. "I wouldn't cross the water with the like of that fella for all the gould in the Bank of Ireland! Sure what chance could we have of gettin' safe to land—an' it's a dangerous job enough, God

knows—with him carryin' on that way? It's the rale blashted haythen he is!"

The other man simply walked away without turning his head.

"I may as well get out too," grumbled Burke; "there'll be no chance at all of reachin' the islands, with only the three of us in the boat."

"Sit where ye are, Pat," called a voice from the shore. "I'm as well able to lend a hand as ayther of them two that's left ye, an' Patsy here can pull an oar—he can so. Sit down, Mr. McTavish, and for the Lord's sake try an' have a bit o' sense! Is it Hector's corpse ye'll be wantin' us to find when we get over beyant? You ought to be down on your knees thankin' Father Dinnis for consentin' to lend a hand—you that has the whole barony turned again' ye for the way ye tr'ated him."

Thus exhorted Alexander sat down, a trifle shamefacedly, and Honor and Patsy paddled through the surf and scrambled into the curragh.

A perilous voyage indeed was that, and had it not been that the priest was a practised oarsman and that his brother-in-law steered skilfully, while Honor and Patsy were both strong of arm and earnest of purpose, the little craft might never have come to land; as it was, it was near the hour of sunset when they ran ashore, being greeted by a score or so of the island folk who had watched their progress from the rocks above the landing-slip.

Alexander, exhausted by his exertions and worn with anxiety, had scarcely voice enough to propound inquiries, and the excited, curious little crowd turned from him to the priest, who in a few words of Gaelic announced his status and declared the object of the expedition. When he ceased there was a moment's hush, the islanders gazing at each other in stupefaction

and it would seem dismay. Then a dozen voices broke out together.

"What is it? What are they saying?" queried Alexander, clutching at Honor's arm; he could not understand a word of Irish.

"Och wirra! Och, what 'ull we do at all! Sure, they say they don't know what's become of Hector!"

"What's that?" exclaimed Alexander almost inaudibly.

"If things have fell out this way, it's your own fault," interposed Burke savagely. "Ye have the lad as ye r'ared him. They are saying there's a woman here who took care of him the first night and brought him to the priest in the mornin' an' the young spalpeen made off with himself while the rest of them was at Mass, and hasn't been seen sight or light of since."

"Wait now, wait!" said Father Casey. "The child can't have vanished altogether. The island's not that big there wouldn't be some trace of him left. The best thing we can do is to go to the priest if he's here still, and see if he can help us at all. We must find out first where the priest is staying."

He propounded this question in Gaelic, and presently half a dozen willing hands were raised to point, and half a dozen excited voices uplifted in explanation.

His Reverence was staying at Thady Fitzpatrick's. He had been giving Stations, but couldn't get back for the storm that was in it. He was waiting now till the morning.

"Come, then, let us go and find him," said Father Casey. "I must trouble you to come this way, Mr. McTavish," he added, turning to Alexander. "The last person who had anything to do with your boy was the priest here. If we go to him he may be able to throw some light on Hector's second disappearance."

Alexander stared at him as though he hardly took

in the sense of what he said, and the priest, with an impatient movement, strode after his wild-looking guides, while the rest of the party closed round the Burke family.

A barefooted woman, walking beside Honor, plied her with questions. Was this boy a right boy at all? The way he had carried on at Brian McMorrough's was a caution. He had run out of the house sooner than bless himself; aye, and when all the people were gathered together at Mass if he didn't break the window in the priest's room and leap out. "You'd think he couldn't stand comin' near anything good," she added suspiciously.

"Ah, the poor child's right enough," returned Honor. "Didn't I bring him up with my own son that ye see yonder and that's to be a priest one of these days, so don't I know? It's his father that's put them queer notions into his head. That's his father."

She nodded towards Alexander, who was walking heavily in their wake, and the Inishmaan woman hastened to point him out to others in the company. Heads were turned, tongues were clucked, eyes were opened wide in amazement and something like disappointment. *That* the father of the young stranger whose advent had convulsed the whole island! That poor, weary, haggard man whose ragged, sandy beard was turning grey in such a very natural and human way, whose pallid face was freckled like many of their own, and whose distracted gaze held nothing but mortal yearning and anguish! The wild theories which had been circulated from one to the other instantly took flight. It was impossible to believe that there was anything diabolical, or even sinister, about a being who so palpably lived and suffered like themselves.

A check awaited the party when it reached its goal, old Thady Fitzpatrick informing them that Father

Murphy had ridden out soon after noon and had not yet reappeared.

"Nothing would serve him but to set out himself to look for that red-haired boy from the mainland," he added. "He's been doing the same these last two days; but what is the good of it? It's clean gone he is, whatever sort of a creature he was. Sure, if he was like one of ourselves he couldn't be living now after being out on the rocks two days and two nights."

"God bless us!" exclaimed Honor, wringing her hands.

The old man looked curiously at her.

"Are you his mother, ma'am?" he asked in an altered tone.

One or two of her escort hastened to explain:

"No, but it's the same as his mother she is. Didn't she bring him up with her own son—that fine lad there?"

"It's to be a priest some day he is, and the noble person here is her brother and a priest."

Thady, bending a stiff knee, took Father Casey's hand and kissed it with a murmured blessing.

"It's heart-sorry I am not to have better news for you then about the little fellow," he said. "But he's gone from us, and that's the truth. We did the best we could for him the little time he was under our roof. The woman of the house gave him the good food, and the holy priest put him in his own room, the way no harm would come to him as he thought."

"And he broke the window on us," put in the woman, who was now peering over his shoulder, and who spoke with a shade of asperity, though she had bowed respectfully to the priest. "I was inside in the room with my poor mother who's lying sick this long time, your Reverence; but the people in the kitchen heard him making a noise and didn't take any notice;

and after Mass, when his Reverence went to open the door, if the young stranger hadn't broken the window and climbed out on to the rocks! Aye, had he, and that's the last we heard of him."

Alexander had pushed to the front and now stood looking from one to the other with starting eyes. He had lived for twenty years in the midst of an Irish-speaking population, and had not mastered one word of the language.

"For God's sake," he cried hoarsely at last, "will nobody tell me what they're sayin'?"

Father Casey turned to him with a mixture of irritation and compassion:

"Ah, man!" he cried, "what sort of teaching at all did you give your son that he should run away from those who were trying to defend and protect him? It seems the people here put him under the care of the priest."

"What call had they to do that?" interrupted Alexander fiercely.

"Oh, don't distress yourself," rejoined Father Casey with some natural heat. "The boy stayed no time with him. He broke the window of the priest's room in there and made off."

The colour rose in McTavish's thin cheeks, and his eye sparkled.

"That's my laddie!" he cried exultantly. "That's my brave laddie!" Then something in the other's expression startled him. "Where is he now?" he added quickly.

"Nobody knows," rejoined the priest. And this time he spoke more gently. "He has never been heard of since."

"Do ye mean to say," broke out Alexander huskily, "that nobody in the place would be willing to give him a helping hand?"

Old Thady, who spoke a little English, as did many of the islanders, though they preferred to use the Gaelic, now interposed in the former tongue.

"There wasn't one other house in the island that would be willin' to take him in. He didn't behave right, and Brian McMorrough, that let him into his house when he first come, has had the bad luck since. Isn't his only son sick on him?"

"Come, come," said the priest sharply. "That's nonsense."

The bystanders looked at each other, and though they did not dare to answer Father Casey directly, he gathered something of the state of the case from the confused remarks in Gaelic which they exchanged with each other.

"Wouldn't any Christian lad bless himself before he began to eat?"

"Didn't he run like a hare the minute he saw the iron in the old woman's hand?"

While Father Casey was endeavouring to piece together these fragmentary details, a sudden shout from the outskirts of the little crowd made everyone start and look round, and a red-petticoated, bare-legged lad was seen leaping over the rocks behind the cottage, calling out the while.

"He says his Reverence is coming now," cried a man more quick-eared than the rest. "He says his Reverence is riding down the path with the corpse of the strange boy lying in his arms."

In another moment indeed the young priest rode into their midst on his rough, sure-footed horse. He held in front of him what seemed to be an inanimate figure with arms and legs helplessly dangling, the head with its wet, red hair, lying inert on his shoulder.

Honor and Alexander rushed forward together, but the woman was the first to reach the horse's side, and

at her agonised cry the boy lifted his head and stretched out his weak arms.

"Mammy!" he exclaimed.

Honor gathered him into her arms with speechless joy and gratitude, and carried him into the house. Alexander staggered after, the tears pouring down his face. Even in this moment of exquisite relief he was shaken with passionate jealousy.

The young priest, still sitting on his horse, looked round in surprise, and his parishioners hastened to enlighten him as to the identity of the new-comers. Then Father Casey, having ascertained that the boy, though drenched with rain and spray and weak with hunger, had suffered no serious injury, and having directed that only a small supply of food was to be administered to him, approached his brother-in-arms. Having introduced himself and shaken hands, he inquired where Hector had been found, and was told that the curate had discovered him in one of the wildest and most inaccessible parts of the island, whither he had apparently wandered on the day of his flight. He had lain hidden among the rocks, living on seaweed, and emerging every now and then to scan the seas, on the chance of somebody from the mainland coming to his rescue, or of a hooker leaving for the Connemara coast.

"Isn't it incredible," the young man added, "that such bigotry could exist in a Christian country? That little lad has learnt his lesson well. I got out of my bed to take him under my care. The people within made him sit by their hearth and fed him; yet rather than stay under the same roof with a priest, he ran out into the storm. He was ready to face cold and hunger, even the risk of death. What do you think of that?"

"Ah, well!" said Father Casey. He patted the horse's neck, and continued after a moment: "The

prejudice has been handed down for generations. It's in his blood."

The other let his rope-rein slip from his hands, and sat for a moment looking thoughtfully before him.

"And these people here," he said, "the best people in the world and the simplest. Look at the way they carry on about fairies and 'omens and accidents'—everything that their catechism tells them they're not to believe in. I may preach till I'm black in the face, I may talk and explain for ever, but I can't put a stop to it. They got into their heads that this child was a changeling or something of the kind. A woman, young Mrs. McMorrough, befriended him at first. It was she who brought him to me; but by an unfortunate coincidence her own son, a delicate little fellow, always ailing, fell sick the day after that boy was brought into the house, and of course it was supposed to be his doing. Even she would not help me to look for him. And she's a good woman, mind you. They're all good—anything like their faith, their charity to each other, their patience——!"

"Don't be making yourself so unhappy, man," said Father Casey. "I grant you we've too many bogies in Ireland. Our imaginations are too active, and our memories are too retentive. A great many of our troubles come from that."

"Yes; I believe over yonder, on the mainland, you had some downright pagan customs till a few years ago," said the younger man. "I needn't be so much ashamed of my people and their fairies, when it is practically only the other day that you were able to stop that business of sending a naked man on a white horse riding into the sea during the spring tides. That must have come from some heathen rite of propitiation."

"It wasn't that I meant exactly," said Father Casey.

He paused a moment, patting the horse's neck again. "I was thinking of the things that haunt me still. Aye, indeed, ghosts of old times, some of them—bad, cruel, old times, that will never come again, but that maybe it 'ud be no harm to forget. That's for ourselves. And, on the other hand, the prejudices of my Orangeman and his like are nothing but bogies too. You and I, my good friend, are worse bugbears to them than 'the long-toothed hag' is to the children of this island."

"I've no patience," interrupted the other hotly, "with such folly as that. Simplicity is one thing, and bigotry is another."

"You've laid your finger on one of the knots of the Irish tangle," rejoined Father Casey. "There are always two sides to every question, and the mischief is that neither party in Ireland will believe the other is sincere."

"No man can be thoroughly in earnest who sees more than one side," said the curate.

"Whisper now," said Father Casey jovially. "When you were a little fellow, weren't you afraid of being in the dark? I know I was. Oh, the queer shapes I'd be imagining and the odd noises I'd be hearing, and then when the light came—gracious goodness!—that black thing in the corner was only the table I'd be taking my breakfast off, and the noise was just the rain dripping from the thatch, or, maybe, my old dog snoring in his barrel."

"But what's this light you're hoping for?" asked the curate.

"I'm hoping for all kinds of light," rejoined the other. "There's common sense for one; and, after all, there's the Grace of God!"

CHAPTER IX

OWING to the lateness of the hour and the still unsettled state of the weather, the rescue party were unable to return that night, and its members were billeted upon various houses in the neighbourhood.

It was considered advisable for McTavish and his son to be quartered upon old Thady, as Father Murphy's presence would ensure immunity from any possible molestation. Honor Burke, to the surprise and annoyance both of her husband and Alexander, declared her intention of sitting up with Hector.

"It's maybe light in the head he'll be gettin', with all the hardship he's after puttin' over him," she explained. "Besides, he ought to be gettin' the little bit of nourishment reg'lar whenever he wakes, and I'll be here to give him the sup o' milk or the cup o' tay."

"I could aisy do that," said Alexander quickly.

"Ye could, and ye could aisy frighten the life out of him too. I seen him givin' ye a couple o' quare looks, and small blame to him. Wasn't it because ye were threatenin' to murder him entirely that he took off with himself?"

Alexander, understanding the hyperbole which recalled the fact that his last words to his son had contained the promise of a severe thrashing, and remembering with a spasm of pain the undoubtedly scared glance with which the boy had recently recognised him, made no further protest; and after seeing Hector comfortably established on a makeshift bed by the fire, and observing Honor take up her post on a stool

beside it, he retired unwillingly to the small room which had been allotted to him for the night.

Silence soon reigned in the cabin, if, indeed, silence can ever reign in such island dwellings. The wind sighed round the house, and the roar of the surf, as it tumbled and broke on the rocks, was perpetually heard. In the brief intervals of respite came the drip of rain from the thatch, and the trickling of a variety of streams which the late storm had brought into being, and which bubbled and leaped over the rocks to the rear of the house. But even within doors many sounds combined to banish McTavish's slumber. Through the chinks of the loose stone partition which separated his chamber from that of the priest he could hear the young man's deep breathing, and even an occasional snort or snore, testifying to the soundness with which he slept after his long day's wandering in the open air. By and by another slight noise fell upon his ear; he had left his own door ajar the better to become aware of any movement in the kitchen. He was torn with anxiety on Hector's account, for, indeed, the boy seemed weak enough. There was now a stir, but neither Honor nor Hector spoke, and presently all appeared to be still again, except for an unaccountable and persistent rattle.

After a few minutes Alexander could bear it no longer, and springing from the bed, on which he had thrown himself in his clothes, he peered into the adjoining room.

The sods of turf, set on end for the sake of greater heat, were now all aglow, emitting a soft, warm radiance, which revealed to Alexander that the boy lay still as he had last seen him, sleeping as peacefully as an infant, with his head pillowed on his arm. It was the woman who had changed her position; she was no longer seated on the stool, but squatting back on her heels in the half-kneeling position so usual with Irish

folk when at their prayers. The ruddy light, which showed him her lips moving, brought out faint gleams from the brown rosary, polished with much use which was now slipping through her fingers.

"What are you doin', woman?" whispered Alexander fiercely, as he strode into the room.

Honor made the sign of the cross, and kissed the medal attached to her beads as though to close one portion of her devotions, before replying.

"I'm doin' what you had a right to be doin' yourself, Mr. McTavish. I'm givin' thanks to God for sparin' the lad there this night."

"Do you think a man can't give thanks in his heart without carryin' on with the like o' thon foolery?" growled Alexander, pointing with a shaking hand to her beads.

Honor looked at him for a moment, and then kissed the medal again reverently. Her eyes were flashing in the firelight, but she put a strong constraint on herself.

"I'll not be talkin' to ye at all," she said. "Ye'd never understand, and I don't want ye to have the chance of givin' out more of such talk. Go back inside now, and don't stop here disturbin' the boy. And if it's givin' thanks in your heart ye are, ye'd best get shut of the wicked thoughts that's in it."

Alexander went back dumbly, closing the door behind him this time, and, throwing himself on his knees beside the bed, buried his face in his hands.

The woman in there had had the last word, and Alexander's conscience, which was a tender one of its kind, warned him that it was a true one. His heart, instead of being overflowing with joy and gratitude, was full of wrath and jealousy, and even revolt.

These Papists had conquered all along the line. He had sworn to have nothing to do with them, and it

was thanks to them he had recovered his child. A priest had been the mainstay of the curragh's crew. A priest, again, had discovered the boy in the out-of-the-way spot where, had it not been for him, he might have died of exposure. He was even beholden to the influence of that priest for the food and shelter which had been afforded to him and Hector by people who had otherwise held themselves suspicious and aloof. The whole trouble had arisen from the fact of his having tried to extract Hector's promise not only to shun priests, but to avoid the company of Catholics. And here were they both under the same roof with a priest, while a Catholic pattered her Popish prayers by his son's very bedside.

Alexander writhed in impotent anger, and at the same time strove to conquer himself.

Clasping his hands tightly together, he told himself that this was a trial, sent perhaps to test the sincerity of his recent resolve, a resolve which he now reaffirmed with great earnestness.

"Only let me get him home safe," he breathed, "and I'll lose no time in keeping the promise I made."

He grew calmer as he dwelt on this promise, thinking within himself that it was surely that which had brought about Hector's safety; and that it was thus to his own sacrifice, and not to the activity of these Papists, that he owed the rescue of his son.

It was late on the following day when they reached home, and the boy had sufficiently recovered to admit of Rose's welcome being entirely joyful.

Hector himself, however, remained strangely silent, alike disinclined to speak of his adventures or to ask questions of his parents. He was disposed to be slightly impatient with his mother, to whom at no time he accorded any great measure of respect, looking upon her as a comrade, and occasionally a fellow delinquent,

who chafed against the rule of the master of the house as often as himself. With his father he was even less talkative and more constrained, glancing at him surreptitiously from time to time, and shrinking a little when he met his eye.

Alexander for his part was taciturn, thoughtful, and depressed, and Rose's transient happiness was soon overcast.

The next morning, after McTavish had gone to his work, she said querulously to her son:

"Och, Hector, whatever bewitched ye to behave the way ye did? Ye have the Da near out of his mind, and the Lord knows what'll become of us all if he carts us away from here."

"Takes us away from here?" ejaculated Hector.

"Aye, that's the thing he says he must do. It's the way you've been carryin' on with them Catholics that has upset him. It's goin' to give notice to the master he is, and to take us all back to Belfast!"

"To Belfast?" echoed Hector, turning pale and gazing at her in bewilderment. "Sure, that's a town, mother!"

"So it is, an' a dirty, ugly one too. But it's there he's goin', and he'll have to work in a mill, and God knows how long he'll be left alive to us! Sure, it was because he was near consumed he come away out of it."

Hector's heart swelled. It seemed to him a monstrous injustice on his father's part, thus cruelly to punish his own single act of rebellion.

After one sharply scrutinising glance at his mother, to ascertain that she was guilty of no exaggeration, he turned on his heel and walked quickly out of the house in the direction taken by Alexander. Rose looked after him.

"He's the very cut of his father," she said to herself.

"Just every bit as dour and as quare! To think he wouldn't give me the satisfaction o' knowin' what it is he has in his mind to say now; but not a word out of him."

Alexander, who was weeding onions, looked up as Hector's shadow fell across the bed.

"Well?" he inquired.

"Da," said Hector, "I'd sooner ye'd bate me and get done with it."

Alexander straightened himself and looked at him.

"Who said I was goin' to bate ye?" he asked.

"Ye're angered with me in your heart," rejoined the boy in an unsteady voice. "It's not like yourself ye are with me. I'd sooner ye'd take the stick to me now, and then make friends after."

"I'll not take the stick to ye, then," said McTavish.

He stood still for a moment, eyeing his son, and presently Hector said:

"My mother was tellin' me we was all to be travellin' off to Belfast."

"She'd no call to tell ye that without I gave her leave," rejoined McTavish, frowning.

"Is it true, Da?" queried Hector almost inaudibly.

"It is true," said his father.

"Is it because I ran off that way?" asked the boy, very white now.

"Not altogether," answered McTavish, leaning on the fork with which he had been turning over the soil, and speaking reflectively. "It was that opened my eyes, I grant you. I come to see what I'd been doin', and how I'd kep' you from your birthright. Aye, it wasn't you alone that was in the wrong, laddie. We was all of us wrong, myself most of all. But I'm goin' to make up for it now; I am goin' to put my hand to the plough, and there'll be no lookin' back."

The solemnity of his tone warned Hector that his

father was thoroughly in earnest; but he was so much accustomed to be indulged by him, Alexander's occasional outbreaks of severity being invariably atoned for by an increase of tenderness, that he could not believe that in this softened mood his pleading should be unavailing.

"Och, Da!" he said. "Is it draggin' us away from home that way you'd be? Sure we'll all break our hearts."

McTavish slowly drove the fork into the ground, a look of grim determination coming over his face, but he did not answer.

"It'll kill my mother!" cried Hector. And he burst into a passion of sobs, throwing himself face downward on to the ground.

"I hope not," said Alexander. He waited a little until the storm had partially spent itself, and then raised the boy to his feet.

"Hector laddie, it's harder for me nor for anyone; I'll ax ye to believe that. Ye've never heard me tell ye a lie, have ye?"

"Never," said Hector, looking at him hard.

"Well, then, this is what I tell ye now," Alexander resumed. "It's just the hardest thing I ever had to do in my life. Aye, there's whiles I feel as if my own heart would break in two. I'm ower old to transplant, and that's the truth. It's easy enough to pull up a little plant, but when ye try to pull up an ould one ye leave half its roots in the ground. Well, that's the way it is with me. But I've made up my mind to it because I know it's right."

Hector, gazing into those fixed, shining eyes, felt that it must be right, but was still puzzled. Why should it be right for them all to go away from the place where they had been so happy?

"Ye'll no understand now," went on Alexander,

answering the unspoken inquiry, "but ye will some day. I'm movin' up yonder for the sake of our relection. Relection is the one thing that matters in this world and the next, and we're no gettin' the chance of practisin' it here."

"Mother says it'll maybe kill ye to live in the town," Hector said, with a catch in his voice.

"I'll live as long as the Lord wills, ye may be sure o' that, laddie," said McTavish. And with that he gently pushed Hector away.

The boy had never loved him so well as at that moment. He felt a slight fear of him, it was true, but an increased respect and an intuitive sympathy.

* * * * *

It was on an April morning that Alexander McTavish and his family took flight for the north.

Mr. Marshall had been unable to believe his ears when Alexander, who had been in his service ever since he himself had taken charge of the parish of Cloon-na-hinch, declared his intention of leaving; but the gardener had remained firm. After many questions and many more futile remonstrances he had owned that his reasons for this step were conscientious ones, and the Vicar found it impossible to shake his determination by either argument or persuasion.

Then had ensued the sale of the McTavishes' little possessions, which would not have been worth the expense of packing and transport, though at its conclusion Rose declared somewhat bitterly that the loss would have been less had they moved at least some of their household goods. As a matter of fact, owing to the rumours before alluded to, and the general unpopularity roused by the knowledge that the McTavishes were symbolically shaking the dust of Cloon-na-hinch from their feet, the sale was practically boycotted.

Honor Burke bid for one or two small things, and the Vicar himself bought in the pig and Rose's poultry; but the furniture was secured by a second-hand dealer from Galway at a quarter of its value.

As the McTavishes sat in the cart which was to convey them and the boxes and bundles which contained their wearing apparel, bedding, and the few other trifles which Rose had been permitted to carry away, they made a forlorn group enough. A lad from the village, engaged temporarily by the Vicar until the new gardener should arrive on the scene, was installed on the driver's seat—a plank laid across the upper end of the cart—and Alexander sat beside him, looking very grim, with his compressed lips and fixed eyes, his black Sunday clothes lending additional gloom to his appearance. Rose and Hector sat in the body of the cart, each perched on a bundle of bedding. Rose was crying bitterly and made no pretence to conceal the fact. She had often complained of the quietness of the place, and of how she never saw anyone from year's end to year's end, and might as well be buried alive; but now she only remembered that it was the little home of which she had taken possession as a bride, where her child had been born, and where she had lived for twelve peaceful years. It looked so pretty, too, the little house peeping over the fuchsia hedge, which Alexander had planted because Rose disliked the all-pervading stone dykes. There was the honeysuckle growing over the porch, which had been put in the ground the day before Hector was born; now it not only covered the porch, but climbed over the adjacent wall and made a frame for the window, where she used to sit sewing.

Standing up in the cart with a sudden movement, she peered in at this window now, and fell back, sobbing afresh.

That desolate room her houseplace! To think of everything being gone! Her furniture, which she had chosen herself and kept so carefully polished, and the curtains which she had made—every stitch of them—and the cretonne chair-covers! She had taken so much trouble with these, and they had fetched but a few shillings.

And now she was to begin life all over again, in a place to which she had become estranged by long absence; with hardly any money with which to set up house, for Alexander's wage had been a scanty one, and her own ill-health had made large inroads into it. Alexander himself was not a strong man, and was looking ill enough just now. He would never keep his health if he went to work in the mills at his age, and after so many years spent under such different conditions.

"Whatever is to become of us all I'm sure I don't know!" moaned Rose. And she hid her face in her hands and rocked herself backwards and forwards on a rolled-up mattress.

Hector sat perfectly still, with his arms folded and his face set in unconscious imitation of Alexander. He was determined not to cry, not to make matters worse for his father, who was already suffering so much. Even when the cart backed through the gate and went slowly jogging down the road, he braced his shoulders and looked straight before him, determined not to turn his head.

But presently the driver pulled up as two figures came hastening to meet them. Honor, cloakless because of her haste, with the wind lifting the black waves of her hair as she hurried towards them, and Patsy, running beside her, his sunburnt face all bedabbled with tears.

"Och, Rose asthore!" said Honor.

"Hector, is it goin' ye are?" cried Patsy.

Hector, grimacing to keep back his tears, stretched out his hand, and Patsy, climbing precariously on the wheel, flung his arms about him.

"I'll miss ye," said Patsy. "Och, Hec, why couldn't ye stop with us!"

"We mustn't be late for the train," remarked Alexander, without looking round.

"Thru for ye," said Honor. She stretched out her hand to Rose and gripped hers for a moment—Rose was sobbing so violently as to be incapable of speech—then she turned to Patsy, pulling him impatiently down from his perch.

"Get out of that till I say good-bye to the lad that's as good as your brother. Hector, avick, come here till I get my arms round ye! Ochone, son of my heart!"

Hector knelt up and stretched out his arms, and she clasped him to her passionately; then, stepping down from the spoke of the wheel, she walked beside the cart as the horse moved on again. A low moaning sound broke from her, the long-drawn note of the *keen* with which the women of the West express poignant sorrow.

"We must hurry up out of this," said Alexander, who felt that the strain was almost more than he could endure, and dreaded its effect on his wife and Hector; he was conscious also of the jealousy with which Honor's attitude towards his son never failed to inspire him.

The driver, sulkily enough, jerked the rein, and the horse broke into a trot. Honor and Pat were left behind, and after standing for a moment in the grey, wet road, they climbed on to the bank which bordered it.

Once again the wail fell upon Hector's ears, and involuntarily he looked back; and having once broken his resolve, gazed as if he could never gaze enough.

For years afterwards, when he closed his eyes, he

could conjure up this scene—the green bank all gleaming in the April sunshine, with the boggy, rock-strewn field behind, and the distant background of the Connemara hills, mistily blue. He could see the noble figure of the woman, who was to him the embodiment of all motherhood, standing with her arms outstretched and the tears trickling down her beautiful face. And often and often, amid the din of voices and the whir of machinery, there would come back to him the echo of Honor's voice, keening for the loss of her foster-son.

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PART II

CHAPTER X

It was April again when Hector returned to Connemara, and that was thirteen years later. During the period which had elapsed he had risen in the world; he was now riding a motor-bicycle, and beneath the conventional oilskin coat wore a good suit of tweeds.

His bodily growth had fulfilled the promise of his childhood, and his mental activity had apparently kept pace with it, for as he now sped along the wet, grey roads he was not only conscious of natural joy in returning to scenes once familiar and dearly loved, but was able to appreciate with critical, almost poetical pleasure, the wildness of his surroundings, and the contrast which they afforded to the scenes amid which his actual lot was cast.

The stony fields with their vivid patches of green, the brown sweep of bogland with its endless variety of tints, amber and tawny and russet, and palest primrose where the sedge, withered last year, held its own with the new growth, the deep chocolate brown of the peat itself becoming black where the sods had been recently cut. To his left the sea, first brilliantly blue, then gathering and holding all the glories of the sunset, and far away the Twelve Pins catching in turn the evening glow.

Something of the wild rapture which used to seize Hector in his childhood gripped him now. He felt as if he could have shouted and sung aloud. He did cheer occasionally as he rode through some scattered hamlet,

waving his arm and flourishing his handkerchief to the inhabitants who stood to see him pass.

Make what speed he might, however, night had fallen before he reached Cloon-na-hinch; the stars were shining, and a crescent moon was riding aloft, just where the last remnant of the afterglow still lingered. Hector fell silent as he passed his former home. The fuchsia hedge had grown so tall as to shut out the house from the road, but he fancied that he caught a glimmer from the window through the interlacing twigs. In another moment, after triumphantly sounding his hooter three or four times, he halted at the Burkes' gate.

Having alighted from his machine and unlatched the gate, he stood still for a moment, surprised to find that his chest heaved with a mighty sob and that his cheeks were suddenly wet.

How homely it was, with the glow from the turf fire shining through the windows and the open half-door, and the distinctive and unforgettable fragrance of the smoke from that same hearth greeting his nostrils!

While he paused, with his hand still on the latch, the half-door was flung open and a flying figure came towards him. The light from the house showed him curling tresses and a slim form, and brought out red gleams from the fluttering draperies. But before he had time to utter a word, the new-comer flung herself into his arms, small hands were clasped behind his neck, and a cheek no less wet than his own was pressed to his face.

"It's yourself, avick," said a voice, of which he thought he had never heard the like for music.

He could not speak, but pressed the slight form to him with all the warmth imaginable. This must be Norah—little Norah grown a woman! And what a welcome she was giving him! He scarcely heard what

she was saying, and, indeed, she spoke with difficulty, for she, too, was sobbing now.

"Oh, that this day should come, an' us lookin' for it so long! My mother's just helpin' the Da into his clothes the way he'd do ye honour. But come in—come in—she thinks she'll never get to see ye quick enough."

She caught him by the hand now and pulled him along, both running till by common accord they stopped on the threshold and looked at each other, Hector obtaining a momentary vision of a beautiful face, smiling though tears still hung on the long lashes, outlined like the tendrils of hair about the brow, by the glow from within.

But even as he looked the girl jerked her hand from his with a wild shriek.

"It's not Patsy—it's not Patsy at all that's in it! It's a stranger!" Here she broke into Irish. "Oh, mother, mother, I'll die of shame. I'm after kissin' a stranger!"

"What's that, what's that?" cried a man's feeble voice from the kitchen. And simultaneously Honor appeared in the doorway.

"What's the meaning of it?" she was beginning, angrily enough, when suddenly her whole expression changed, and she ran forward embracing the young man in her turn.

"It's no stranger he is, asthore," she cried brokenly. "It's Hector—my own lad that I thought never to see again. Cead mille failthe, my heart's darling! Och, but it's you that's welcome! Norah, mavourneen—sure, she's run off with herself to hide. It's ashamed of her life she is; but she's no call to be that—wasn't it the same as brother and sister you were? Come in, come in! It's Himself will be glad to see ye, though it's not able for much he is these times."

Hector entered the familiar kitchen, looking round

eagerly; but Norah was nowhere to be seen, and the only occupant of the room was a gaunt, stooping figure with a waxen face, which he had difficulty in recognising as that of Patrick Burke.

"Where's Pat?" he asked querulously. And his large, unnaturally bright eyes looked past Hector.

"Sure, Patsy hasn't come yet," answered Honor quickly. "The way we all made the mistake was hearin' the horn goin'. We made sure it must be Patsy comin' the same as always on his motor-bike. This is Hector, Pat—Hector McTavish, that used to be the same as a son of the house in the ould times. It's he that's after ridin' down here on one o' them quare machines, an' it's the right welcome we'll give him, won't we?"

Hector looked at her gratefully, glad to see that she, at least, was unchanged. There were a few more lines in her face, and her figure was a little more ample than of old; but the hair was still black and glossy, and the smile almost youthful in its radiance.

"I was lookin' for Patsy," said her husband, but extended a cold, limp hand nevertheless, to the newcomer.

"Och, Pat'll be comin' sure enough. He's not one to break his word; but there does be delays on the road, more particular when it's on the bike he is. It's himself that'll be overjoyed to see ye, Hector. Had ye made out anyways between the two of ye to come the same day?"

"We had not," said Hector. "I haven't heard anything from Pat this length of time; but it's in Coleraine I am now, and that's not so far off; an' I'm afther gettin' a holiday, and myself and another fellow set out to ride through Donegal. But all at once the notion took me to come on here instead an' see you all."

"Is that the way?" said Honor. "Well, look at here now, ye'd best go put the bike in the shed the way

if a shower comes on it'll get no harm. Norah'll get a light for ye. Norah! Och, she's hidin' in the room yet. It's best not to notice her for a bit. Sure, ye know the shed, don't ye?"

"Aye do I, and every corner of the place," rejoined Hector. "And I have my own light on the machine."

He went out, and Patrick Burke, who had till now been supporting himself by the table, crept back to his place in the chimney corner.

"I'd as lief as not he hadn't come to-night," he muttered. "I'd have liked well to have had our own lad to ourselves, an' him comin' to give us the priest's blessin'."

"Then it's myself that's glad Hector's come," cried Honor. "If there's anything in the world 'ud bring good luck to the lad out there, it 'ud be that—the first blessin' from his ould playfellow! Och, Pat, I wouldn't like him to be left out an' him the same as a son to me, no matter what all there was again' him, the poor fella!"

Hector now entered, and Honor, with a look of tender admiration, held up the lamp the better to survey him.

"It's the fine man you've grown," she exclaimed. "Is it six foot high ye are?"

"Six foot and a bit," rejoined Hector, with a laugh.

"An' there's the red head on ye still!" went on Honor, laughing too. "An' I can see the boy's face in ye, though it's beyond a boy ye've got entirely."

As Hector stood, laughing but a little bashful under this survey, the door of the "room" opened a few inches, and then was quickly shut again.

"Herself's afther peepin' through," said Honor, chuckling. "But don't say a word. She'll be ready enough to make friends with ye when Patsy's here. Of course she was but a little bit of a child and you goin' away—she can't remember ye like the rest of us."

Hector set down the bag which had been strapped over his shoulders and removed his oilskin coat; then, looking round with a smile, he drew forward a stool and balanced himself cautiously upon it.

Honor clapped her hands together.

"How well he remembers his own little ould creepy stool!" she said. "True for ye, avick—that's the very one you used always to be sittin' on, an' that's Patsy's beyond."

"I'm delighted to hear that Patsy's coming to-night," cried Hector joyfully. "We'll be complete then." Here his eye wandered to the opposite door, of which a chink was again open. "Is he much changed?" he went on.

"Changed——" Honor was beginning, when Pat Burke's hollow voice chimed in:

"He's that much changed that it's another altogether he is. Ten year he was at college, an' now he's afther bein' ordained. It's God's priest he is now, Hector McTavish, an' the whole of us is waitin' this night till he comes to give us his first blessin'."

Hector's face sobered and he looked back at the old man very thoughtfully, marking how the eyes in the wasted face were shining, and how the pale lips trembled as they spoke.

"That's great news indeed," said Hector.

Honor turned her eyes upon him, full of an appealing tenderness.

"An' it's glad I am, Hector, avick, that ye are here with ourselves this night to take your own share of the joy an' the blessing he's bringing. You an' him that played together when you were little, aye, an' slept together in my arms many's the time before that! It's nice to think that when the one son comes back with his grandeur and his glory on him, the other son should be here with us too, to welcome him an' get his blessin'."

Whisht now, is that the sound of the horn—I can hear the whir of the machine up the road! Norah, Norah, he's comin'!"

The door of the inner room opened and closed rapidly, and with a whirl of red skirts Norah was making for the outer door, when her father called her back:

"Come here, girl! Come back out o' that—what is it you'd be doin'?"

"Runnin' out to the gate to watch for Patsy."

"Then you'll do no such thing. Ye're forgettin' the differ that's in Patsy now—Father Pat, I should say. It ill-becomes me to make little of the Lord's Anointed, though he is my own son. It's 'Father Pat' yez'll all call him from this out—mind that now! Yourself too, woman"—with a commanding glance at Honor, who nodded in reply—"an' it's here ye'll kneel with the rest of us, Norah, the way the whole of us'll get his first blessin' at the wan time!"

The hooter now sounded close at hand, and Burke signed breathlessly to his wife to help him out of his chair; then the couple knelt down together, the wife supporting the man's swaying frame in her strong arms. Norah, with her face rapt in an ecstasy of love and joy, dropped upon her knees too, and seeing that Hector hesitated, stretched out her hand as though in invitation, smiling at him the while, for she deemed him reluctant to intrude on the family group.

Hector glanced at the lovely face, and drawing a deep breath, caught the hand; and then he, too, knelt down

"How could I have the heart to hurt her feelings?" he said to himself, and then, with an inward smile, "Patsy Burke's blessing couldn't do anyone any harm."

In another moment the young priest's figure stood on the threshold, and with uplifted hand gave for the

first time the priest's blessing to the family within. In their eyes he "came trailing clouds of glory" into the homely place, but Hector saw only his old comrade, the honest lad whose friendship had brightened his lonely childhood, and whose hands, hallowed though they might be in the eyes of these others, he would clasp in good fellowship by and by.

Now Father Pat was raising his father and supporting him back tenderly to his place, and now Honor and Norah were clinging round him. It was with an arm round his mother's neck that Father Pat turned at last towards the tall figure, which, having risen like the others, stood a little apart in the dim light.

"And who's this at all?" he asked.

"Who do ye think?" cried Honor gleefully. "It's Hector himself—Hector McTavish, that dropped in unbeknownst to us all in the very nick of time to give ye joy with the rest of us."

"Why, that's grand," cried Pat, going quickly towards him, and Hector's outstretched hands were engulfed in a very human muscular grip.

They looked at each other laughingly and affectionately. Pat's thick hair, though closely clipped, made as ever a kind of black thatch over his brows; his face was freckled still, but paler than it used to be, owing no doubt to the great stress of recent emotion; his dark eyes appeared to be more deeply set and had a steadier look than of old, but otherwise it was the same face which had so often laughed at Hector from behind rocks on the strand yonder, or looked expectantly out for him over the half-door.

"Is it an Orangeman you are yet, Hec?" inquired Father Pat, with a humorous glance at his red head as their hands fell apart at length.

"I am that," said Hector, and he looked at the other oddly for a moment and then smiled again. "But

that doesn't prevent me wishin' ye joy an' bein' glad to be here to welcome ye this night."

He saw Norah's face beaming at him behind her brother's arm and spoke the more heartily. Was there ever such a smile as hers—not only revealing such bewitching dimples but lighting up her whole face? Those grey eyes, how they shone behind the long curling lashes! And the brow above, he had never imagined anything so white and pure—it might be the face of an angel, he said to himself, only for the dimples; and the sweet, shy way with which she peered at him from behind her brother's burly form was entirely human.

"Come now, stir yourself, woman, and give the lad a bit to ate," said Burke; "it must be famished he is after his long journey."

"I'm a bit stiff," admitted his son. "By the way, I'd best go put my machine in the shed."

"Not at all, not at all; sure your sister 'ull do that for ye. Run out now, quick, Norah, an' hurry back the way ye can be helpin' your mother."

"Let me go," cried Hector. "I'll put it in beside mine. I came here on my bike too," he explained to Pat.

"Did ye now?" rejoined he with interest. "I'll go bail yours is worth twenty o' mine. I only picked mine up cheap, and it's a ramshackle old thing. What make is yours?"

Hector gave the name of the manufacturer, and the two argued about the merits and demerits of divers machines with keen interest for a minute or two, until the old man, catching his son's eye, signed to him to come and sit beside him.

"I'll be havin' to go to my bed soon," he remarked, "an' I want to be hearin' first all about this great day. How many of yez was ordained?"

As Father Pat turned to answer him, Hector could

see how, amid the sudden gravity which overspread his face, there came, as it were, a hint of some hidden ecstasy, which for a moment transfigured the homely features.

He went out, lingering a little in the shed, not only to examine his friend's very dilapidated bicycle, but to give the family time to discuss at their ease those intimate matters in which he could take no share.

When he came back they were all seated at the table, adorned in honour of the auspicious occasion with a new oilcloth cover. A roast leg of lamb was placed before Burke, who, however, signed to his son to carve it.

"I'd sooner see ye do it, avick," he said, and then he corrected himself, "but see that ye take the first slice yourself, Father Pat."

"Then it'll be gettin' cold on me," said Father Pat, with a cheery laugh. "No, it's yourself I'll help first, the way ye won't be kept too long from your bed; and then my mother can have the 'Good Woman's Bit.'"

"Come here, Hector, and sit down beside me," said Honor. "Now, Norah, bring the potatoes, child."

"That pot's too heavy," said Hector, hastening to the girl's assistance.

Their fingers met on the handle of the big pot, and they looked into each other's eyes and laughed.

"Do you remember the time ye carried the pail of water home for me?" she asked, as she piled the steaming potatoes in their wooden bowl. "It's beginnin' to come back to me now, the time when you an' me was little. Bringin' the water was Patsy's job, but he miched off with himself that day an' I thought I'd be very grand an' do it myself. I carried my can to the stream all right, but sorra a bit could I get it back again until you came to help me."

"I don't remember that," said Hector; "but I re-

member the time that Pat an' myself dressed ye up in seaweed—do ye mind that, Pat?"

"*Father* Pat," corrected Burke.

Hector coloured and went on hastily.

"We found a lot of that green fringy weed, you know, and we put some of it on her head and some round her shoulders and some round her waist—it looked grand over the red of her petticoat, and we carried her home between us and popped her down in the middle of the floor."

"An' didn't I run ye out of it with the broom when I come in?" put in Honor. "The poor child—it was in dreeps she was, an' the say-water makin' a puddle on the very floor. Aye, ye young spalpeen, it was your notion, was it? I'll go bail it was; you were always the one for the notions." Shaking her fist playfully at him. "But come over here now or your supper'll be gettin' cold."

When the meal was over Honor looked across the table at her husband, and said persuasively:

"It'd be as well for ye to come with me to the room now, Pat. Ye'll want the good night's rest to be able for the great day to-morrow."

A sort of hush fell upon the little company, and Burke submissively pushed back his chair and rose, propping himself against the table until his wife came to his assistance.

"Good-night all," he said, and then with a farewell glance at his son, "God bless ye."

"What's to-morrow?" asked Hector, addressing the young priest.

"I'm to say my first Mass," answered he simply. "I got leave to come here to say it, because my poor father wasn't able to travel."

"I was sorry to see him looking so bad," observed Hector. "What is it that's wrong with him?"

"He took the fever one time it was very bad all about the place," answered Pat. "Sitting with a sick neighbour he was, Tim Conneely that used to live up at the end of the boreen. My father went to try what he could do for him, and caught the fever himself and gave it to my three young brothers—aye, there was three little boys born after ye left, Hector—and they all went to Heaven that time. My poor father was never the same since. It left him with a kind of wasting, that's been getting worse and worse. I'm afraid he isn't long for this world."

"That's a poor case," said Hector, "and what'll your mother do if she loses him?"

"Ah, well, we are all in the hands of God," said Father Pat.

"It's a wonder ye'd think of leaving her if that's the way," went on the other, following his train of thought. "Sure, she'll have no one to work for her."

"I got the Call, ye see," said Father Pat. "I had to go, an' she herself was the happy woman when I told her."

Norah, who had been removing the dishes, now returned to the table, and her brother inquired after the health of Hector's own father and mother.

"My poor father's away," said Hector gravely. "I mean, he's dead," he added, seeing they did not understand. "He couldn't thole the mill-work. He got consumption after a few years of it and was carried off."

"It's a pity ye left this place," said Norah.

She was leaning her elbows on the table and supporting a little curved chin on her hands.

"Maybe it was," said Hector seriously, "but, ye see, my father thought it right."

"Is your mother alive?" asked the priest after a pause.

"She's alive, but she's married again," rejoined

Hector, with a darkened brow. "I went to live with my uncles for a bit—my father's brothers—and then I heard of a job in Coleraine, and I've been there since."

"Aren't yourself and your mother friends, then?" inquired Norah.

"Well, we don't have much to do with each other, and that's the truth. I couldn't get over her puttin' another man in my father's place. I begged and prayed of her not to insult his memory that way. I was only a lad, but I was gettin' good wages and I could have kept her right enough."

Something inflexible in his face struck Norah unpleasantly; she looked at him a little shrinkingly.

"But your own mother!" she exclaimed. "An' she but a young woman still maybe—why would ye be so hard on her?"

"I suppose it was hard," said Hector, and the lines of his face relaxed. "I suppose she wanted a bit of happiness like the rest of us—maybe it's too hard I was."

CHAPTER XI

HECTOR was accommodated with a "shake-down" in the loft, which he shared with Father Pat, the little room which his priest uncle had formerly occupied being now allotted to Norah.

Hector was glad enough to climb the ladder which led through a trap-door to this upper chamber, one end of which was used as a granary, while the other end, the boarded floor of which had been well scrubbed, and the rough walls newly whitewashed, had been prepared for Pat.

Hector's improvised bed consisted of three or four sacks stuffed with straw, and was fairly comfortable. He was glad enough to throw himself upon it after his long day in the open air, but to his surprise the young priest remained in the kitchen.

"I have my Office to finish," he said, as Hector peered down at him through the trap-door, which was always left open, as there was no other means of ventilation, "and I must prepare myself against to-morrow. I'll come up as quietly as I can, so as not to disturb you—go to sleep, you!"

But Hector did not go to sleep. He lay on his rustling bed watching the light shining up from the room below.

So Patsy was saying his Office! How often they had both watched the Cloon-na-hinch parish priest walking up and down his strip of garden, reading his well-worn breviary. And now Pat had a breviary of his own, and was to say Mass to-morrow in the chapel whither he had so often gleefully scampered on a Sunday

morning, sometimes swinging the white surplice which his mother had washed and mended. But the personality of Father Pat soon faded from Hector's thoughts, and Norah took possession of them. He tried to recall the image of her which had been enshrined in his memory amid a crowd of others to serve as contrast to the squalid actualities of town life. But the elf-like wraith with its bright eyes and its tangled curls would not come at his beck; instead came the vision of Norah as she now was, lovely beyond anything he had ever dreamed of, fairy-like still in her slimness and grace, like an angel for innocence and piety—but all human too. He dwelt upon this with increasing delight. How impetuously she had thrown herself into his arms, mistaking him for her brother! He seemed still to feel the little hands clasped about his neck, the pressure of the wet cheek against his. Lucky would be the man who would one day receive such caresses, not as he had done, by proxy, but as a personal gift. Lucky would be the man whom Norah would one day love and marry.

His heart began to beat rapidly, and he sat upright in the darkness, strange, tumultuous thoughts crowding into his mind. If he had never gone away—if his poor father had not held such strong views on the subject of religion, he and Norah might very well have made a match of it. They might have had a little house all of their own down by the sea; he might have been a fisherman perhaps—in imagination he pictured himself riding in a light canvas boat upon the waves; his vivid Celtic fancy showed him the green translucent billows sliding under the keel, the white foam breaking into glittering spray. And then to come home in the dusk, or in the grey morning twilight, and to be met by Norah in the doorway, to feel her arms about his neck; his cheeks would be wet with the salt spray, as they had

been wet that evening with tears, and hers might be wet too—she would have been longing for his return, or anxious at his delay—and then how he would laugh at her and comfort her.

Hector checked himself with a start, and strove to banish these fancies by conjuring up the memory of his father's voice: "Always be true to your releegion, laddie—releegion is the one thing that matters in this world and the next."

He could see the fixed gaze of Alexander's keen light eyes, could feel the grip of his fevered hands on his wrists.

But the image of Norah would come again, peeping at him through the doorway, signing to him to kneel down.

Daylight surprising him after belated slumber, revealed to him that Father Pat's bed was vacant. A stir and bustle seemed to pervade the house: steps and voices, opening and shutting of drawers, energetic sweeping in the kitchen. He got up, and having performed his morning toilet with all possible speed, descended the ladder, to find, as he had surmised, that Norah was vigorously plying her heather broom.

"You're early at work," said he after the first salutation.

Norah wore a dress of dark blue stuff pinned back over a starched white petticoat; a bibbed apron shielded this holiday attire, and she had tied a red cotton handkerchief over her curly locks to protect them from the dust.

"I'm gettin' all ready, the way Father Pat won't have to wait for his breakfast when he comes in," she said. "A few of the neighbours 'ull be comin' too. And my poor father won't be able to wait long for his cup o' tea, so I must get everything ready before we start."

"He had a right to drink his cup o' tea first, well,"

said Hector. "He'll be faintin' on ye if he has to wait till yez come back."

"Och, sure the Da's comin' with us," cried Norah. "Sure he'd break his heart entirely if he wasn't at the first Mass, and, of course, he couldn't touch bite nor sup before he goes to Holy Communion. We're all to go to Holy Communion from Patsy this morning—from Father Pat, I mean. Och, Hector, it's sorry I am that yourself should be left out!"

Hector could not resent the words, so exquisite was the compassion in the look which accompanied them.

"I'm the sheep that's outside the fold, am I not?" said he, with an unsteady laugh.

Norah sighed.

"Well, the poor sheep may look through the gate, anyway," said she. "Will I make you a cup of tea before ye go, or will you wait like the rest of us?"

"I'll wait," said Hector, and then he flushed: "I was thinkin' of waitin' here altogether till ye came back," he added.

"Do you mean you'd stop away from Father Pat's first Mass?" exclaimed Norah. Her grey eyes grew large, and then flashed with unmistakable anger. "I didn't think that of ye," she went on.

"But, Norah——" Hector was beginning, when he saw a tear splash down on the little brown hand that plied the broom, and suddenly checked himself. "If ye think it right for me to come and me so different from the rest of you, I'll come," he said in a muffled voice.

Norah smiled at him.

"What else could it be but right?" said she.

Honor now burst in from the bedroom:

"The Da is just ready," she announced breathlessly. "Aren't you done yet? Give me the broom, child, and run quick and pop on your duds."

"Can't I be helpin' you?" asked Hector.

"Well, you might just be fillin' the kettle out o' the tub beyond and put it on the chain—draw up the hook a bit, the way it won't boil over on us before we get back—that's the good lad."

Even while she spoke Honor had finished the sweeping, and now, darting about the room with a speed remarkable in one of her majestic build, she laid the table—a coarse clean white cloth adorning it for the occasion—and was hurriedly cutting rashers of bacon from the flitch suspended from a beam.

"The knives is in that drawer there, to your hand, Hector. Thank ye, avick, ye're the greatest of helps to me."

"I'm well used to do my own housekeeping, you see," rejoined Hector. "Has Patsy gone on?"

The mother straightened herself.

"He has, God bless him! He went on to the chapel early, the way he wouldn't be gettin' distracted, meetin' the neighbours."

Hector stared for a moment, a little puzzled by the word "distracted"; but he presently divined the sense in which she used it.

"It's right for him to be keepin' himself recollected, ye see," she went on, "and it 'ud be hard not to have a word or a smile for the friends he might be meetin' on the road. Sure there's a power of them comin'—Father O'Flaherty says it'll be the same as a Sunday—everyone's that anxious to be at Patsy's—Father Pat's, I mean—to be at his first Mass. I wisht Father Dinny—that's my brother, you know—could have been here, but he couldn't get away; 'tis worked terrible hard he is. Is that Himself callin'?"

A shuffling foot was heard in the inner room and Burke's voice was feebly uplifted.

"It's time we was startin', Honor. Isn't the cart there yet?"

"The boy hasn't brought it to the door, but the horse is ready yoked. Ye might run out, Hector, and tell Billy Brophy we're ready now. Norah! Are you comin', child?"

When Hector returned, having assisted Billy to pilot the pony and light cart, which had been well washed and filled with straw, past the somewhat narrow turning round the barn, he found the family assembled on the doorstep.

Pat Burke had shaved and carefully oiled the thinning grizzled locks which had once been of as bright a brown as those of his daughter; a high, well starched shirt collar opened in front to show his wasted throat, and his black clothes hung loosely on his attenuated frame. His face wore an expression of happiness which absolutely transfigured it; it was indeed a blissful soul which looked through the cavernous eyes. Something of the same expression was in Honor's beautiful eyes, and even little Norah seemed to share this solemn happiness. She wore a light white shawl over her head and shoulders, while "the cloak" draped Honor's stately form.

Honor climbed into the cart first, and then having arranged the straw so that it made a comfortable nest, extended a hand to her husband. Norah had meanwhile brought out a chair from the kitchen, and Hector assisted her father to climb in, spreading a rug over his knees.

"Will I walk?" asked Norah.

"Best not," rejoined Burke breathlessly. "If Father Pat wasn't to see you in your place beside us he might be put about, thinkin' you wouldn't be in time."

"I'd be in time if I had to run all the way," cried Norah, but she climbed obediently into the cart. Hector and Billy put the tail-board in place, and Honor took the reins. Then they all made the sign of the cross, and Billy led the pony through the gate.

"I'll go fetch my coat," cried Billy eagerly, "and I'll be after you in a minute; I'll catch ye up at the turn."

Hector walked on somewhat disconsolately; he had hoped to make the transit in Norah's company, and now he was to be put off with Billy Brophy.

"I oughtn't to be goin' at all," he said. But as he reached the angle of the road he saw the cart jogging in front of him, and the mere flutter of Norah's white shawl seemed to draw him as a magnet. He began to walk so fast that Brophy had considerable difficulty in overtaking him.

As Honor had announced, the whole countryside was turning out to do honour to Father Pat Burke, and to claim their share in the particular blessing which must be dispensed to them from the hands of their own neophyte. Early as it was, Hector and Billy overtook groups of people walking in the same direction as themselves; and, when they turned off the high-road, and took to the stony uneven track which wound across the bogland to the little white chapel where Father Pat had been christened, where he had many a time pattered his catechism, in response to the hasty if imperative questioning of a monitor but a few years older than himself, and where he was now to say his first Mass, it was already crowded.

Hector, detaching himself from his companion, forced his way towards the front, and took up his position at the end of a bench whence he could obtain a good view of the proceedings.

It was a poor place enough, that little Connemara chapel, with its damp-stained, colour-washed walls and its uneven flagged floor. The altar was a wooden one, painted white, and there were white imitation flowers in the cheap glass vases. A little red light was burning in a tarnished lamp, Hector noticed, and beneath this,

kneeling against a wooden stool, was a tall figure in a black robe, which Hector did not at once identify. It was not until the head was presently raised, revealing Pat's unmistakable thatch of hair, that his friend recognised him.

Father O'Flaherty, a little stouter, a good deal greyer, a little more lined in the face than Hector remembered him, was bustling about the sanctuary, lighting the candles, straightening the altar-cloth and directing in a loud whisper the movements of two little boys whose rusty cassocks barely reached to the knees of their brown bare legs, and whose cottas were by no means immaculately white. The old priest wore a soutane like Pat, Hector observed, and a surplice in somewhat better condition than those of the altar boys. He also wore a white stole round his neck.

McTavish's eyes mechanically took in these details and then wandered eagerly in quest of Norah.

There she was in the very first bench next her father, Honor being on his other side. The old man was sitting down, his head buried in his hands, but the other two were kneeling upright, their eyes fixed on the altar, their lips moving.

Suddenly two old men came forward from the end of the church, and walking to the altar rails, knelt down, one on the right and one on the left, beginning to pray aloud simultaneously in Gaelic.

They were saying the rosary, but according to the custom in those parts the petition and response were delivered at the same time, the congregation devoutly joining in in lowered tones, each side following its leader.

During this ceremonial, Father Pat, obeying a sign from the older priest, followed him into the vestry, and as the last *Amen* sounded from the body of the church, emerged again, clad in his white vestments, and carrying the chalice.

Hector caught his breath as a sound only dimly heard once before fell upon his ears: a sort of murmur which in some inexplicable way suggested a hush. The whole congregation, already on its knees, bent forward as a field of corn might bend beneath the passing of a great wind.

Then Father Pat's voice, low and unsteady, began to speak, and his old pastor, kneeling by his side, led the responses.

Hector kept his eyes fixed on Norah's face, watching its every expression, and the momentary feeling which was half distaste and half an unaccountable shrinking of the spirit which might almost be likened to fear, soon left him.

Piety and goodness radiated from the girl's face, enhancing its spiritual beauty; he might think her misguided, but these rites at which she was assisting with such intense devotion must surely be innocent enough. By and by the impressiveness, even the poetical aspect of the scene, struck the imaginative side of him. There was something wonderful and beautiful in the fact that all these people who had seen Pat Burke grow up from infancy to manhood looked upon him now as infinitely above them; even his own parents revered him as "the Lord's Anointed"—Pat's father had used those very words—chosen and set apart for evermore.

When the bell rang, and the people bowed lower with the murmur, in some cases the groans, which had roused his childish dread on that bygone morning at Inishmaan, he realised that these were the outcome of a greater depth of adoration, a more passionate fervour; and he knelt in his place, wondering.

At length he saw old Pat Burke rise and totter to the altar rails, supported by his wife and daughter, and immediately after with a rush, such as can only be seen

in Ireland, at least half of the congregation pressed forward too, as many as could find room taking up their position beside the Burke family, while the rest stood or squatted on their heels in rows behind them, ready to seize the first vacant places.

And then Father Pat came down the altar steps, with his pale face irradiated and his lips trembling as he uttered some Latin formula over and over again, and the first to receive the Holy Communion from his hand was his old father.

To Hector's mind, however, the most touching and the most extraordinary part of the ceremonial was that which took place when the Mass was over, and the young priest, still clad in his white alb, and with the stole crossed over his bosom, though the outer vestment had been removed, sat in a chair which was placed for him at the foot of the altar steps, extending his newly consecrated hands that the faithful might kiss them.

Again the first to kiss these anointed hands was the father. Hector's own eyes were wet as he noticed how the tears poured down the old man's face, and how repeatedly he kissed his lad's hands, pressing them to lips and breast in a very passion of love and devotion. It seemed as if he could hardly bear to let them go and make way for Honor, who came next, sobbing too, but with a face that shone, almost as her son's had shone when he descended the altar steps holding the Host in his hands. And then came Norah, but Hector could not see her face, for by some instinctive movement of reticence she kept it hidden in her shawl.

After a few minutes, however, while the rest of the friends and neighbours thronged round Father Pat, Hector felt a touch on his arm, and Norah whispered in his ear:

"Would you lend a hand to help and carry the Da out into the air?—He's fell in a kind of wakeness."

Hector darted forward and carried Burke almost unaided out of the chapel, though Honor supported his head, and Billy Brophy followed ready to lend a hand if needed.

The old man revived as soon as he reached the open air, and even tried to laugh.

"Sure, nothin' at all ails me only bein' overjoyed," he said. "I am just feelin' my heart's that full it can't hold any more. I'll be goin' home with myself now the way I won't have Father Pat upset."

"Ye'll drink this cup o' tay first," said a ruddy-faced pleasant-looking old woman, hurrying forward from the adjacent priest's house. "I have it ready wet for his Reverence—he's going down to take his breakfast with yous this morning, but I didn't want him to go fainting on me. Well, Mr. Burke, I wish you j'y—it's a proud man you ought to be this day! You're well rewarded now for the sacrifice you made givin' up your only son to the Lord."

"The Lord's welcome to him," said Burke tremulously. "Aye, ma'am, I'm—I'm—well, I do be feelin' like the holy ould man who was after takin' Our Lord in his arms. I'm ready to go now. I prayed to see this day, and I was let see it, and now whenever my time comes I'll not be axin' to stop. Is the cart there?"

"Aye," said Honor.

The little procession returned home in the same order in which it set out, except that it was now reinforced by a large contingent of friends.

As many of these subsequently crowded into the Burkes' house as could find standing room, and when the two priests came in and were duly conducted to the places of honour, Norah and her mother were kept busy in ministering to their wants.

Hector, too, assisted, being glad to snatch a chance mouthful when and where he could.

A babel of talk and laughter filled the place, Father O'Flaherty's voice dominating the general din, and his pealing laugh ringing out as he cracked various well-worn jokes with his parishioners.

Norah catching sight of Hector's face made her way towards him.

"It's yourself that's lookin' solemn," she remarked. "Is it too much noise they're makin' for ye?"

"Is it me mind the noise?" rejoined Hector.

"But you wouldn't make little o' yourself to laugh with the rest of us," said Norah, with a twist of her dimpled chin.

"I'm just wonderin' at you all," said Hector. "The most of you was cryin' a while ago—you very nearly had me cryin' too with lookin' at you, and now it's laughin' you are."

Norah gazed back at him as though puzzled herself, and then laughed.

"Well, that's the way with us, you see," she said, "but it's laughin' and cryin' for the same reason, because we're so happy."

CHAPTER XII

"I OUGHT to be goin' off with myself out of this now," said Hector. The homely forms of speech, familiar to him in his childhood, came readily to his tongue, contrasting oddly with his clipping Northern accent.

The last guest had departed, and Father Pat, on the invitation of the parish priest, had accompanied him home. Honor, having persuaded her husband to lie down and rest himself after the unusual fatigue and excitement, was assisting him to take off the most irksome of his holiday garments, the heavy frieze coat, the starched white "dicky" with its accompanying stiff and sharply pointed collar, the new brogues purchased in honour of the event. Pat was glad enough to get "shut of them" all and to stretch himself groaning under the green baize quilt.

Meanwhile Norah had run out to milk the cows, and it was while surveying her at the performance of this belated task that Hector hazarded the foregoing remark; it was made, it must be owned, in a somewhat half-hearted fashion.

"An' why would ye do that?" inquired Norah, pausing so that the milk trickled through her fingers instead of squirting into the pail; her bronze head, which had been pillowed on the jetty flank of the cow, was now uplifted in surprise. "That's no sort of a visit to be payin' us after all the years ye've been away."

"I think your father and mother will be glad to rest a bit," rejoined Hector, "and I don't think I ought to be crowding up Patsy the way I am."

"Och, sure, there's plenty o' room in the loft," said Norah; she thought the excuse a flimsy one, and added, with a toss of her head: "But, of course, you that's so well used to towns 'ud be apt to find us too quiet."

"Now ye know it isn't the truth ye're tellin', Norah," he retorted indignantly.

Norah tossed her head again, and the little cow, vexed at the want of attention to herself, tossed her head too, and made an abortive attempt to kick over the pail.

"Stand still," ordered Norah, and she added one or two uncomplimentary remarks in Irish.

Hector failed to understand these, but thought her voice as musical as ever even when lifted to this new note of anger; moreover, he guessed that this wrath was evoked more by himself than by the cow, and though he himself was angry too, the suspicion in some inexplicable way gratified him.

"Don't ye know," he insisted, "you are makin' out what isn't the case?"

Norah, without this time desisting from her task, glanced up with the innocent coquetry which comes as naturally to a pretty girl as to the wild pigeon sitting demurely on her branch, while her would-be mate bows and coos and struts before her in all the glory of his burnished plumage. Something in the man's piercing light-blue eyes—something compelling, gave her a queer little shock, however, and her own fell before it.

"Ah, you know I was only going on," she said. "But I think ye might very well stop with us another few days, an' it's my mother that'll be offended with ye entirely if you run off from us that way."

"I'd be glad enough to stop, an' ye know that," rejoined he in a low voice; then he drew a sharp breath and held himself upright. "But I'm not goin' to be

idle while the rest of ye are so busy. What way can I be helpin' ye now?"

The musical spurt of the milk had ceased, for Norah was "stripping" the cow with one hand, and but a few drops at a time fell into the pail. Conversation was therefore the more easy.

"Well, we'll be wantin' another creel of turf before this evenin'," said the girl; "an' then there's—but I wouldn't be likin' to ax ye to do that."

"What is it?" asked he eagerly.

"Myself an' Billy Brophy was just in the thick o' bringin' up the wrack from the shore," rejoined she, "but we kept back the cart yesterday the way it 'ud be clean an' dry for my Da this mornin'; but if you'd lend a hand instead of him he could be gettin' on with the trenchin'. We're terrible behind every way, what with one thing and what with another."

"To be sure I'll help," said Hector, and then he added quickly: "it's too hard that kind of work is altogether for the likes of you."

"Och, I'm not very big, but I'm strong. Ye'd never think what a big load I can lift. Sure it's thankin' God I ought to be to be able to do it."

"An' you an' Billy were workin' at it together?"

Hector frowned as he propounded this query, repeating it twice with gathering impatience as Norah delayed to answer, not from any reluctance on her part, but because the first time she failed to catch the question, being engaged in conducting the black cow by the horns out of her corner of the shed, and dismissing her with a pat or two on the flank to the rock-strewn pasture on the other side of the haggard.

"It takes two of us to manage that work," rejoined she; "the pony's a regular little divil when he gets down on the shore; he'd be makin' off cart an' all if there wasn't someone to mind him. I do be standin'

at his head, and of an odd time takin' a turn with the pitchfork, but Bill lifts the most o' the wrack."

"Well, you an' me'll do that job for this once," said Hector with great satisfaction. "I'll go an' be gettin' the turf now while I'm waitin' for ye."

When he came in with his creel he found Honor sitting in her husband's chair by the hearth; she had assumed her workaday clothes, but was sitting idle, her hands folded on her lap.

"It's yourself?" she remarked, as Hector entered. "It's the good boy ye are to be helpin' us that way. I ought to be ashamed o' myself sittin' here doin' nothin', but I was just thinkin' an' you comin' in, it might all be a drame. Aye, many's the time I've dram'd of it, the day when my own little boy 'ud be sayin' his first Mass an' all the neighbours comin' to hear him, an' myself an' his father kissin' his holy hands—an' now it's over! The day's come an' it's near past, an' he'll be goin' away from us soon, off among strangers. Maybe it's in a town he'll be where he mightn't be gettin' his health. Well, well, he'll be in the hands of the Lord wherever he is. I don't know why I'm talkin' to ye this way, Hector, but I was always very open-mouthed! When a thing rises up in my heart it's out o' my lips before I know where I am."

"I think Patsy had a right to have stopped at home with yourself and the father," said Hector sympathetically. "He ought to be workin' the farm for ye."

Honor got up and looked at him half impatiently, half humorously.

"I'm served out now for lettin' my tongue run on that way," said she. "There's yourself thinkin' I'm wishin' Patsy—Father Pat, I mane—back! But wait till I tell ye. From the very minute Patsy was born—the familiar name slipped out uncorrected this time—" "I prayed for him to be a priest; aye, an' when the

fever took the other three little boys that I looked for to be helpin' me, I thanked God that it wasn't this wan—the wan that was marked out to do something better than just help dig pitaties an' drive the stock to the field. If Norah an' myself had to go beggin' our bread after Himself's taken from us, I'll feel I'll have the wan thing to be thankful for, that Father Pat was able to be educated before the bad times come. Ye don't believe me now," she added in a lighter tone as she began to bustle about the room, removing the crockery from the table and pushing back the chairs.

Hector deftly piled the sods of turf in a symmetrical heap in the corner before replying.

"I do believe you, but it's a thing I can't very well understand."

"Maybe not," said Honor.

Norah now entered with her foaming pail, and her mother hastened to take it from her.

"You'd best hurry up Billy now," said she. "Yez might get a couple o' loads up before dark if you're sharp. I'm afeard o' my life of another storm comin' an' gettin' it all wet on us again before ye have it stacked."

"Hector's comin' with me this time, he says," rejoined Norah, "the way Billy'll be able to get on with the trenchin'."

"It's the grand help entirely ye are to us, Hector," cried Honor delightedly. "Troth, this is like ould times, though ye mustn't go crownin' her with seaweed. But it's a dirty job for you in your good clothes," said she.

"I'll take off my coat," said Hector.

"I have the oilskins here that Himself used to be wearin' when he was doin' that same job!" exclaimed Honor. "Try could ye get into 'em? An' there's his ould gansey—if ye wouldn't think bad o' slippin' it on.

It'll stretch, ye know, an' it was always too big for him. Run into the room an' fetch them out, Norah, but make no noise; I think Himself's afther droppin' off."

Norah crept very cautiously into the next room, and reappeared with the garments in question, armed with which Hector clambered into the loft.

When he came down the ladder again, Norah was standing at the door hanging on to the head of the wild-eyed Connemara pony. She wore her oldest red petticoat, and had supplemented her own print bodice by a flannel bawneen of her father's, which, buttoning low over her hips, gave her a quaint appearance. She had again tied a cotton handkerchief over her head, and her eyes danced beneath it.

"Make haste and jump in," she cried, "else Pauddeen 'ull be off with himself. I think Billy's afther givin' him a terrible big feed of oats in honour of Father Pat this day. It's all I can do to hould him."

Hector caught the reins and jumped in, and Norah clambered up beside him, whereupon the pony, having reared up and then kicked at the cart in pure lightness of heart, frisked them out of the yard and down the road.

A perplexity of emotions took possession of Hector when he found himself once more on the rocky strand over which he had last been carried in Honor's arms, after his return from Inishmaan. He thought of that bygone freak of his, and of all that had led up to it, with wonder now and a kind of faint amusement; and then his face darkened again as last night's wild, sweet vision returned to him. The strong, soft breath from the Atlantic seemed to intoxicate him; the familiar smell of the seaweed and the exhalation of the salt water drawn up by the hot, fierce burst of sunshine from the wet rocks seemed to sting his blood. He

glanced from Norah, in her homely yet vivid-hued dress, to his own fisherman's garb, and heaved a deep sigh of regret and impatience. Had it not been for the chance encounter with Father Casey on that memorable day so many years ago, his dream of last night might have been realised. It might be his own bonny wee wife who was sitting beside him in the cart, and he, Fisherman Hector, might be helping her to get a load of wrack for the enriching of the little field which was their common possession!

Norah stole a glance at him from beneath the lashes which, as he now observed, had golden tips to them in the sunshine.

"Ye have me afeard with the frown that's on ye," she said. "What is it that makes ye so cross-lookin'?"

"I'm thinkin'," rejoined Hector—and his face was now very gentle if still regretful—"I'm thinkin' that it was yourself that did me the bad turn that day long ago, when ye bid Patsy help ye carry the wrack for Widow Clancy."

"Did I do that, then?" asked she in surprise. "Aye, I can't mind it at all."

"Ye did though," insisted he. "Patsy an' myself were standin' on the big rock down there, an' I was talkin' to him about the sea, and how well I'd like a life on the water, an' you come runnin' up to ax wouldn't we come help ye gather the wrack for Mrs. Clancy. Says you, 'I suppose I'll have to do it all by myself'" —here he threw back his head and laughed—"an' you no height at all! So Patsy jumps down an' runs off with ye, and I'd have run, too, only for my mother forbiddin' me to go near the water's edge that day, for I was after destroyin' one suit of clothes on her in the mornin'. Is it here we get out?"

"Aye, this is the place. Isn't that a fine lot of wrack we have there?"

"It is, a quare grand lot. Well, as I was sayin', if Patsy an' myself had stood on the rock a bit longer, I wouldn't have come across your uncle, the priest, on my way home, an' my poor father wouldn't have got the upset about seein' me ridin' on his horse in front of him, an'—who knows?—I might be livin' here yet."

"Ah, then it was a pity, an' a great pity," agreed Norah heartily. She climbed out of the cart and removed the tail-board. "Now, I'll stand by the pony's head and strive to keep him quiet, an' you can be workin' away with the fork."

Hector got out of the cart and took up the pitchfork, but his eyes strayed to where the blue, shadowy outline of the Aran Islands lay defined against the sky.

"I'd like fine to go over yonder once more," he said. "'Twas a quare place, an' I was afraid of my life most of the time I was there, an' yet it seems to draw me. Have ye ever had that kind of a feel about a place that it's drawing ye, an' some time or other ye'll have to be goin' there whether ye like it or no?"

"Ah no," said Norah, looking at him wonderingly. "I've never been out of this place. The furthest I ever went was one time I used to go to school at the convent over at Ballymanus. We had a jinnet then, an' my father used to let me take the little cart an' drive that way. It's near eight mile off. The nuns used to be teachin' me the fine sewin' an' all sorts——"

She broke off, surprised at the keenness of Hector's gaze.

"I wonder what else they l'arnt ye there," he said.

"Och, they'd have l'arned me a great deal if I'd have had any head for books; but I never had, more's the pity, an' I was only goin' backwards and forwards a few months, for the fever come, an' the three little boys sickened an' died on us, an' my poor father took bad, an' my mother couldn't spare me after."

Hector's countenance cleared, and he chid himself inwardly for his momentary doubts and alarms. He had travelled a long way since those bygone days when he had so fully shared his father's prejudices on the subject of priests and nuns. Pat Burke, his foster-brother, was a priest, and there were doubtless many like him—thoroughly good fellows; and nuns, though they might for reasons of their own, which Hector considered foolish, choose to live shut up away from the world, were doubtless well-intentioned women. At all events, they had taught Norah nothing which had hurt her.

"I think, maybe," said the girl slyly, "it'd be best if you was to stand at the pony's head an' let me be doin' a bit o' work, Hector. You could be lookin' at the islands as much as ye like, an' we'd get on a bit faster."

"Ah, you little witch!" cried Hector. "You'd make game of me, would ye! Not another word will I say now till I have the cart filled."

Norah stood in front of the pony, patting him, and occasionally scolding him when he showed signs of being restive; but, as a matter of fact, that intelligent animal chanced to perceive a white horse harnessed to another cart and surrounded by a little group of workers some distance off, and was for a time absorbed in watching them. The breeze set the ends of Norah's handkerchief fluttering, and lifted stray tendrils of her hair. She drew the bawneen more closely across her, but Hector, warming to his work, soon stripped off his jersey and laboured in his shirt, his skin showing white under the rolled-up sleeves and below the sunburnt line which his collar usually reached. His bright hair gleamed in the sun like copper, his eyes shone, a fine fresh colour rose in his cheeks.

"A body 'ud never think you was used to livin' in a

town, Hector," remarked Norah guilelessly, after she had gazed at him some time.

Hector shook his head and laughingly touched his lips with his finger, thus reminding her of his recent vow. After a few minutes' more strenuous labour the cart was piled as high as it would hold, and then he answered, as though there had been no interval of delay:

"I do always get out into the country whenever I've a spare hour for a game of hurlies or football or the like of that."

They were now walking on either side of the pony, and the cart was bumping over the stones on its homeward way.

"It's quare to think o' me stoppin' quiet in the one place all this time, an' yourself travellin' here an' there an' everywhere," observed Norah.

"Aye," said Hector. And he looked at her oddly.

He was thinking that after all it was as well; contact with the world might have rubbed off some of that exquisite bloom of hers.

"It's the ignorant girl ye must be thinkin' me—you that have seen so much," hazarded Norah after a moment.

There was no coyness about tone or manner. She was simply stating what she took to be a regrettable fact.

"I do not," said Hector. After a pause he added: "Ye're best as ye are. The world's a wicked place."

"The Da says Belfast's a wicked place," remarked the girl. "I often h'ard him wonderin' at your father bein' so set on goin' back there."

"There's all sorts in Belfast," rejoined Hector, rather shortly. "It's a place ye couldn't help bein' proud of," he went on, after a moment. "The money that's in it, and the work that does be goin' on, an' the power that's growin' in it day by day—it's far beyond Dublin

that way! Aye, an' the men there is strong men, most of them, an' knows their own minds; ye can't help but respect them. Aye, there's a lot of good in Belfast. It's a grand city, though I have a special grudge against it for bein' the death o' my father, for it was that same. He couldn't earn his bread in it without bein' choked and destroyed, an' I can't forgive the place for that."

"Mercy on us!" exclaimed Norah. "It must be a terrible place. And how did you escape yourself, Hector?"

"I didn't work in a mill," rejoined he. "My father wouldn't let me. Though there was one time my mother herself would have been willin' for me to go as a half-timer. There's a power o' children works that way in the mills, an' many of them isn't the worse for it. But he wouldn't hear of it, so I was errand-boy for a bit while I was goin' to school, an' then a quare thing fell out."

"What was that?" asked she eagerly. And she pulled down the pony's nose the better to look round at him.

"Well, there was a cousin of my father's, an oid fellow who had made a good bit o' money out of a bookseller's business. He took a kind of fancy to me, and as soon as I left school he persuaded my father to let me go into his shop."

"Did ye like that?" cried Norah as he paused.

"I did; I liked it fine. I learnt a lot from the old man, an' I was never so happy as when himself an' me 'ud sit one on each side of the fire, with a book in front of us, readin' for hours. The readin' gave me the wish to learn more, and I went to a night school for a bit. And when the old fellow died, he left me a nice little bit o' money."

Here Hector paused, drawing a long breath of entire satisfaction.

"That was grand for ye," said Norah a little wistfully.

"I have it invested," he went on, smiling as he made the pleasant announcement. "I don't touch any o' thon, you understand. It's lyin' by, an' the interest is rollin' up till the day comes when I want it for some-thin' worth usin' it for."

The girl's grey eyes swept the distant prospect thoughtfully.

"When ye do be tellin' me them things," she said, "ye seem to be gettin' a long way from us all here. I don't rightly understand the half of what you're saying, but I can see that ye have the fine prospects. An' here are the rest of us goin' down in the world! But it's glad I am that yourself is doin' so well," she added quickly. "'Tisn't envyin' ye I'd be, nor jealous. Ye wouldn't be thinkin' that?" she insisted eagerly, meeting his intent gaze.

"I would not," said he in a low voice.

"An' is it sellin' books ye are still?" she went on.

"No; I'm an engineer. I'm very well content—earning good wages I am, and like to get a rise if I stop in it."

"An' why wouldn't ye stop in it?"

This time it was Hector who pushed down the pony's nose in order to obtain a clearer view of Norah's face.

"There's no tellin'," he said mysteriously. "I might have a good reason."

His face changed suddenly, and he added with an unaccountable roughness:

"I'm sayin' that, but I know very well I'm like to stop where I am."

CHAPTER XIII

THREE or four happy, uneventful days passed, Hector remaining as guest under the roof which had so long been a home to him, for it was settled that he was not to depart while Father Pat's holiday lasted.

The two young men found an extraordinary pleasure in picking up the links of their old friendship, and spent as much time in each other's company as Father Pat could steal from other insistent claims. It was natural that Norah should often join them, for her brother's visits to his home had been rare of late, and were likely to become still rarer in the future.

One day she found the young men quarrelling, and Father Pat stamping about the room, one hand ruffling his hair in a fashion which Hector well remembered of old. His eyes were blazing. As Norah exclaimed Honor came hastily in from the adjoining room, and paused in amazement as she looked from one enraged countenance to another and listened to the loud, rough voices. The veneer of education and refinement had fallen from both of them. Hector's guttural Scotch accent was not more emphatic than Father Pat's brogue. It was the peasant-priest and the gardener's son who faced each other.

Honor herself forgot for the moment her priest-son's recently acquired dignity as she interrogated him.

"What in the name o' goodness is all this about, Patsy? Is it fightin' you two boys are?"

"Thon's treason ye're talkin', man—rank treason!"

shouted Hector, evidently in answer to some assertion of Pat's.

"Och, it's the politics ye're at?" said Honor in a relieved tone. "There, now, boys, don't be botherin' your heads about the like of them. Sure all the politics in the world would make no differ if the potatoes was blighted on us, or the foot-an'-mouth come."

"Is that what you think, mother?" said Pat, recovering his good humour in a minute. "I can tell ye the blight on the potatoes made one o' the biggest changes in politics ever known in this country or in England either. Sure there'd have been no Free Trade if it hadn't been for the famine; the Irish famine forced the English Government's hand. History tells you that plain enough."

"Look at that now," said Honor admiringly. "That's great talk ye have out of you, Father Pat!"

"Besides," went on her son, with symptoms of returning heat as he caught a snort from Hector, "isn't it what our members of Parliament are always fightin' about—that the landlord shouldn't have his rack-rent when the potatoes are destroyed and the people is starvin'?"

"Och, well," returned Honor, "them times is past an' gone. Sure doesn't the most of us own our own land now or will soon, when we have the loans paid off?"

"An' who do ye owe that to?" interrupted Hector fiercely. "It's the Unionists give ye thon; but it's the Union flag ye'd like to be spittin' on!"

"Cut my head an' give me a plaster," remarked Father Pat. "They might well give us back what they never ought to have taken away."

Honor sat down, resting a hand on either knee, and wagged her head at the belligerents.

"What has me bet," she remarked, "is the knowl-

edge of the two of yez. Sure ye do seem to have the knowledge of the world at your finger ends! Father Pat there able to tell us all about history! I suppose ye l'arned all that at Maynooth, Father Pat?"

"I did," said Father Pat. He took a turn about the room and resumed in a quieter tone. "Of course, when a man begins to go about the world, meetin' other men, an' readin' the papers, an' hearin' what people does be sayin' an' thinkin' he learns to form his own opinion."

"There's more opinions nor one in the world," observed Hector distantly, "an' I think thon's the best that a man picks up for himself. I think——"

He broke off, meeting Norah's frightened gaze, and walked towards the door, the girl following him.

"Och, Hector," she whispered, "don't let the two of yez go fightin' an' quar'lin'. Sure we won't have either of yez long."

"That's true," said Hector. And he turned towards his friend with a smile. "Well, Patsy, we can agree to differ."

"We can that," said Father Pat good-naturedly but firmly too. "I couldn't expect ye to have the same way of lookin' at things as myself. Aren't ye an Orangeman? Sure my mother there often tells us how poor old Dr. Bodkin called ye a young Orangeman when she took ye to be vaccinated."

They both laughed.

"But you're not a right Orangeman," said Honor, a little anxiously. "Ye wouldn't be carryin' on again' Catholics the way your poor father done?"

"I would not," said Hector after a pause of reflection. "I'm like Patsy there in one way and not in another. I've been about the world a bit since my father died, an' I've read a lot, and I've made a few good friends of all sorts. I'm no bigot—I don't care whose hand I take—Catholic or Presbyterian or Episcopalian—it's

all the same to me, so long as the man that owns the hand is honest."

Hector nevertheless delivered this statement with the air of one who is making a handsome concession.

Father Pat threw back his head and laughed, then stretching out a gigantic hand grasped Hector's warmly.

"Ye're the great fellow entirely," he said. "I'm glad ye learned that much, anyway."

The two young men went fishing together that afternoon in entire amity, and Norah accompanied them to the shores of the little lake which lay hidden away in a fold of the moor.

While the two plied their rods she prepared a fire of turf in which she roasted potatoes; and when they presently brought her the result of their sport, she selected and prepared half a dozen of the little fish, and spitting them on twigs roasted them at the now glowing sods.

A very pleasant and savoury meal was that of which the three young folk partook in the twilight, with the evening breeze stirring the sedges beside them and the night-birds flitting over their heads.

"It'll be a grand day to-morrow," said Father Pat, looking up at the sky where a faint glow still lingered.

"It's your last day," sighed Norah.

"We had a right to do something extry," suggested Hector. "How would it be if we was to ride up towards the mountains? They say the country's grand yonder all about the Twelve Pins."

"Aye, we might do that," agreed Father Pat eagerly. "Yourself an' me 'ud easy spin there an' back on our bikes in half a day."

Norah pouted.

"I'd think it 'ud be very unkind for the two of yez to go lave us that length of time an' it the last day," she cried.

"Well, we couldn't take Herself and your Da," rejoined Hector, "but we could easy take you, Norah——"

"Sure that's nonsense," interrupted Father Pat. "How could we be takin' a girl an' we goin' on our bikes?"

"Wouldn't I get a trailer in Galway?" returned Hector. "There must be one to be had on hire in a town of that size. I'll ride there to-morrow mornin' and get one. Why wouldn't she come with us, Pat, an' it your last day?"

After a little demur Father Pat agreed, and when they set out homewards Norah danced along the road in front of them singing for glee.

It was still early on the following morning when Hector returned with a dilapidated trailer, which he had been able to hire for a small sum in Galway. It was decided that he was to be Norah's pilot on the expedition, as poor Father Pat's machine was only capable of supporting himself, and could by no possibility be subjected to further strain. They set off in high spirits, Norah being comfortably packed into her special receptacle, with an additional flannel petticoat ready to hand to cover head and shoulders in case of rough weather. The kettle was stowed away at her feet in company with a basket of provisions, for they intended to have a picnic dinner at a suitable halting place.

Honor and her husband came to the door to see them off; Burke excited, and even elated, at the manner of the expedition, though it was to deprive him of his beloved son's company for many hours.

"Well, well," he remarked, "I wouldn't change places with any of yez—there's for ye now! I'd sooner have the ould jinnet that used to be takin' Norah to school. He'd give a couple o' bucks at startin', an' he'd jib if he come to a puddle, but let you give him a

crack with a stick before he was ready an' there wasn't a straighter goin' beast between this an' Donegal."

Honor, tucking an old shawl round Norah's knees, whispered in her ear:

"Ye'll not be back too late, Norah asthore? It's delighted we are the three of yez should have this bit of fun, but the Da an' myself does be countin' the minutes now, that we have Father Pat with us."

Father Pat began by leading the way, his machine making a tremendous noise as it left the yard.

"I wouldn't say that Father Pat's wasn't the best," said Burke, as he returned to the kitchen. "Ye'd hear him a mile off."

But before they had proceeded half that distance Hector and the trailer passed him.

"I can't keep back," shouted McTavish, "and Norah would be sick with the smell of thon bike if I was able to keep behind."

Father Pat obligingly swerved to one side, and the other two whizzed past.

CHAPTER XIV

"THAT's better," cried Hector, turning his head for a moment to look at Norah's ecstatic face.

She was clutching the sides of the trailer tightly with both hands, and hair and shawl alike were streaming in the wind. "It's lovely," she exclaimed.

On they went, proceeding a little more cautiously sometimes when the track was particularly stony and broken, but flying along the fairly level places.

Brown bogland with little patches of green and even yellow, where a tiny plot of stubble testified to the fact that a crop of corn had been wrested from the reclaimed soil; little lonely cabins with the thatch kept in place by a fringe of stones; streams and lakes glinting through rush and sedge; stunted gorse bushes—and now, looming ever grander in their slate-blues and purples, the Twelve Pins capped with mist.

Hector scarcely noted the strange wild beauty towards which he was speeding: his heart was full of secret, tantalising thoughts. How easy it would be to fly away thus with the woman one loved!

Yonder on those distant slopes there would be rocky places, perhaps caves, where a couple might hide. There would be wild birds to be shot, or one might wander down to the lower pastures and carry off a lamb perhaps! Was there some distant strain of the free-booter in Hector's Covenanter blood that made him for a brief moment exult in this fantastic vision?

He was recalled to himself by a sudden stinging shower of hail that came scudding down, swept in their

faces by an eddying gust from some cleft in the hills. He stopped the machine and looked round at Norah, who was crouching back in her place, vainly seeking protection from the ineffectual folds of the red petticoat.

Hector jumped from his seat and stripped off his oilskin coat.

"Get in under that, asthore," he cried, solicitously endeavouring to tuck it round her while it flapped in his hands.

"Here's the rain comin'—sure you'll be drowned yourself!" gasped Norah.

Hector laughed and, kneeling in the road close to her, drew one sleeve round his own neck. The two laughing faces were very close to each other, and after a moment Norah instinctively drew hers back.

"It's over now!" she cried, and jumped out of the trailer on the opposite side to that by which Hector was kneeling.

"It is not, then," expostulated he. "What in the world made you do that, Norah?"

"Sure, what's the good of sittin' still and lettin' the hailstones melt on ye?" said she. "Wait till we shake them out now—I wonder where Father Pat is? He must have stopped a long way behind."

"He'll be up with us soon," said Hector rather stiffly.

He, too, shook the hailstones from his garments, and swept them from the seat of the trailer with his broad hand.

The shower was really over now, and only a few beads of moisture testified to the fact that some of the hailstones had become entangled in Norah's hair and had melted on her attire.

"He'll maybe be losin' us if we go on too fast," said she. "He might aisy take a wrong turn an' miss us." "He'd have the sense to keep on this road, well," returned Hector rather sullenly; "we might as well be

goin' on and findin' out a good place to take our dinner in."

"I'd sooner wait for him here," announced the girl firmly.

"Och, very well," said he. He walked to his machine, pretending to examine it, and Norah, after a minute's indecision, sat down on a mossy boulder at the side of the road.

"The way it is with me," explained she presently in a timid voice, "is that I do be dreadin' to lose a minute o' Father Pat's company. He'll be gone from us to-morrow, and dear knows when we'll see him again."

"I'll be gone to-morrow, too, then," said Hector, and he crossed the road and stood beside her, looking down at her reproachfully.

"Well, sure, I have you," said she.

She spoke coaxingly, anxious to avert the ill-humour which she divined. Her eyes were laughing sweetly, and the dimples peeping out.

Hector's heart leaped.

"I have you!" That was true enough, he thought. He was hers, irrevocably hers—he knew it in that moment—but would she ever be his? Did she even love him except in a childish, sisterly way which was more unsatisfying than no love at all? That momentary withdrawal of hers, the unaccustomed shyness, tempered for an instant with something like fear—what did that mean? Had she divined his insane longing, or was it merely an impulse prompted by her maidenliness? Or was it again the simple truth she had spoken when she said that she wished to prevent the hailstones melting?

But what was the use of tormenting himself? Even if Norah did love him it would be impossible for them ever to come together.

"A penny for your thoughts," said Norah. "What is it makes ye look so grave?"

"I was just thinking," rejoined he, seating himself beside her on the grey boulder, "here are you and me together just the same as we were many a time when we were little. I was thinking of all the years that's come between thon times, and asking myself what the two of us 'ull be doing by this time to-morrow."

Norah's bright face clouded over.

"Och, you oughtn't to be thinkin' o' sorrowful things on our last day," said she. "Won't you be comin' back to see us next time you get a holiday? Yourself won't be tied as fast as Father Pat."

"How do I know?" rejoined he gloomily. "There's no tellin' what may happen. There might be changes here, for one thing."

"Changes," repeated she, and then her lip drooped. "Och, it's true for you, there'll be maybe the one big change. There's no knowin' how long we'll keep the Da."

"I wasn't meanin' that, well," said Hector. "It's yourself I was thinkin' about. Maybe when I come back I'd find you was married an' gone out of it."

Norah swung her foot in its little well-blacked brogue thoughtfully for a moment or two, and then she said:

"You might find me married, but you wouldn't find me gone out of it, for my husband 'ull have to stop with us and work for my mother."

"Oh, ye have it settled, have ye?" returned Hector quickly. "Ye kept that very dark, the whole of yez, all the time I've been in the house with yez. Who's the lucky man?"

"Och, I couldn't tell ye, yet," returned Norah indifferently. "I s'pose wan o' these days my match 'ull be made, though I would just as soon stay as I am."

"Do you mean you'll let yourself be married off

against your will!" cried the young man, with flashing eyes.

"Och, it'll not be again' my will," rejoined she. "I know very well I ought to get married, the way whatever boy I'll take 'ull be able to help with the farm. And, of course, if he had a bit of money the loan from the Government could be paid off, and my mother wouldn't have that hangin' round her neck."

"An' is that the way you look at thon things?" cried the lad, flushing hotly. "Ye'd let yourself be made a bargain for and bought at the end? Is there no thought of love in your heart?"

It was Norah's turn to flush.

"I've never thought about them things," she said. "I wouldn't marry a boy I couldn't like, and I'd sooner not get married at all, I tell ye. There's no hurry yet with my poor Da the same as he is. It's not a right way ye have o' talkin' at all, Hector. If I'm to get married I'll take the man who'll make me a good husband, and, of course, I'll be fond of him and he'll be fond of me. Look at my Da and my mother—sure, the two of them's wrapped up in each other, an' why wouldn't me an' my husband be the same?"

Hector jumped to his feet and stood looking down at her, frowning; a little pause ensued, and when he spoke at last it was in a voice that trembled oddly, partly with anger, partly with some other strong and hidden emotion:

"Is it that you've no understandin' or is it tnat you have no feelin'?" he asked. "I can't get at the rights of it at all. Would you be ready now to put your hand in the hand of the first well-to-do fellow that offered himself and take your chance of gettin' fond o' him after?"

"Sure, how can I tell?" rejoined Norah, on the point of tears. "Maybe I might come across some boy I'd

feel I could like—but I don't know, I'm sure, how that would come about," she added despondently. "My Da doesn't like me to be makin' friends with any of the boys about—I never had anything to say to any boy but Father Pat, unless it's yourself, Hector, and you're the same as my brother."

"The same as your brother, am I?" said Hector, and he shot a keen glance at her, the healthy colour suddenly fading from his face.

A peewit circling anxiously at a little distance from them uttered its melancholy call twice before the man opened his lips to speak, but the words were never uttered, for even as he sought to frame them, the hooting of Father Pat's bike was heard close at hand, and in another moment he and his machine came bumping over the uneven road.

"I've had the work o' the world to get this old thing goin' again," he exclaimed joyously; "but I have it fixed up now, and it 'ull hold together till we get back."

"We thought you were lost," said Norah dreamily.

"Ye must have been sick and tired waitin' for me," cried Father Pat. "Well, won't we be gettin' on now? We ought to be makin' the most of our time while it's fine."

Norah jumped up and ran to the trailer, and Hector followed. Soon they were scudding along, though not in the same order as before, for Norah insisted on Father Pat leading the way, "for fear," as she explained, "they might go losin' him again."

"Sure isn't it for his sake we come out this way at all?" she added, observing Hector's darkening brow.

"He's the only one that counts," rejoined the young man sullenly.

No further opportunity for conversation occurred until they reached the selected halting-place, an ex-

quisite spot on the borders of a lake larger and more imposing than that of the previous day.

Forsaking their bicycles they went close to the water's edge, and Pat, stretching himself on the bank, took his breviary from his pocket, while Norah, beckoning to Hector to follow her to a little distance, set about making preparations for their meal.

"If ye'll bring me the kettle," she said, "and the sods of turf I had under my feet, I'll have it boiled by the time Father Pat's ready."

Hector obeyed without speaking, but instead of assisting the girl as he had done on their first outing, stood looking down at her silently while she built up the fire.

Suddenly she sat back on her heels and glanced up at him shyly.

"You're vexed altogether with me?" she asked, "and it's our last day!"

"Ye'll want that kettle fillin'," rejoined he, without noticing the remark.

He scooped up some of the amber water of the lake and brought back the kettle dripping.

Norah took it from him, poised it nicely on the pyramid of turf, and again shot an appealing glance at him.

"Don't be angry with me, Hec," she pleaded.

"What does it matter if I am angry or no?" retorted he; "it's little ye care!"

"I do care," said the girl emphatically.

"It's nothin' to you if I'm put about or disappointed as long as Father Pat's content," went on Hector wrathfully; "it's fair redic'lous makin' me grind behind his old rattle-trap with the mud spurtin' up in my face the whole way, and my machine wearin' itself out with tryin' to keep back—all that you might have the pleasure of seein' it wagglin' this way and that way across the road."

"Whethen he rides as well as yourself," retorted Norah. "It's no fault of his if he can't afford to buy a good bicycle, and why wouldn't I like to be watchin' him whatever he'd be doin', when by this time to-morrow he'll be gone from me?"

"And by this time to-morrow I'll be gone from you, but you'll not be troublin' your head about me," said Hector; "you wouldn't care a ha'porth if you was never to see me again."

"I would, then," said Norah, and she buried her face in the folds of her red skirt.

"It's not cryin' you are?" asked Hector remorsefully.

The girl's shoulders heaved:

"I think it's very unkind of ye to be goin' on that way," she said in muffled tones; "ye know very well I'll be terrible lonesome for ye."

"Will you?" said Hector.

There was something so new in his tone that Norah raised her head quickly, disclosing a face that was woebegone and wet with tears.

"I think ye hate me to be talkin' to me that way," she announced, flushing with a sense of injury. "I don't know what call ye have to be sayin' them things, and me only anxious to be doin' the best I could for ye."

"Och, I'm not complainin' that way," said Hector, "it's too good ye were; I didn't deserve the welcome I got from all of you."

Norah turned away her head, but the man could see the colour rush over ears and neck, and immediately cursed himself for his stupidity.

"I wasn't meanin' anythin' about the mistake ye made," he said lamely. "I was only thinkin' of how kind you all were to me whom ye'd seen so little of all them years."

"All them years," she repeated despondently, "and
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now ye're goin' off with yourself and maybe ye'll forget us the way ye done before."

"Norah," said Hector.

She raised her eyes and then quickly looked away again.

"I'd have thought," pursued he, and this time he seemed to be addressing the Twelve Pins of Connemara, for his eyes were fixed on the nearest of those peaks, "I'd have thought a girl like yourself wouldn't be tellin' lies so easy." Then bringing down his eyes from the distant horizon, he said with reproachful tenderness, "Sure ye know very well, asthore, I'll never be able to forget ye as long as I live! No, but it's you that'll be forgettin' me," and his voice once more took a vengeful inflection.

"I'm not one for forgettin' ayther, then," rejoined she quickly, and she brushed the back of her little sunburnt hand across her eyes. "I wisht you wouldn't be lookin' at me that way, Hector," she added petulantly. "It gives me such a quare kind of feel as if yourself wasn't in it at all. Will ye sit quiet here an' watch the kettle now, the way it won't be boilin' over on us, and I'll be gettin' the other things out of the car."

Hector nodded, and then stretching himself against a convenient slab of rock watched the slim, graceful figure move rapidly away, now springing from one stone to another, now breaking into a run when a smoother tract of ground offered itself.

"It's like a wild deer she is," he said to himself; "as free and as unsuspecting."

He rolled over, resting his chin on his hands, the pupils of his eyes contracting as he watched the receding figure. He had all at once recalled a fact recorded in many of the books which he had conned of an evening with the old bookseller, of how the mountain deer must

be hunted up wind lest their delicate nostrils, testing the air, should detect danger.

"You'd think she scented danger awhile ago," he said to himself. And then he sat upright, his face fixed with intensity of purpose: the wild deer should come to his hand and nestle in his bosom.

He could not brook the idea of her ever belonging to any other man, and now for the first time the impalpable dreams and longings which had so often haunted him gave way to a fixed purpose. Norah should be his wife: no obstacle was worth considering, no opposition should deter him—by hook or by crook he would win her.

CHAPTER XV

VERY early on the following morning did Father Pat bid farewell to his home. Norah and Honor were up before dawn making preparations for his departure, and Hector employed himself in polishing up his bicycle. Pat had stayed with his family till the last possible minute, and was obliged to leave thus early in order to report himself at the hour fixed.

The sun was just rising above the horizon when Norah went out to call Hector to breakfast.

"Come in and have a cup of tea," she said. "Och, ye have that cleaned grand. Ye've time enough to be seein' to your own after Father Pat's gone."

"An' I must give the trailer a lick over too," said Hector. "I wouldn't like to be bringin' it back in the state we had it yesterday. I was thinkin', Norah," he went on without raising his eyes from the wheel he was polishing, "that the two of us might be goin' as far as Galway with Pat. I might as well take yourself in the trailer as be draggin' it along empty, an' ye could aisy walk back. Ye'd be home by dinner-time."

"I'll ax my mother," said Norah, brightening a little; her face was very pale and her eyes heavy. She had evidently wept much during the night—was it all on Pat's account, Hector wondered, with a jealous pang.

Honor was packing Father Pat's bag when they entered the kitchen, following out a somewhat primitive method of procedure which consisted in rolling the softer garments into tight balls and stuffing them into

corners, while the boots occupied the place of honour in the centre. She, too, looked pale and heavy-eyed.

"Bad scan to these boots, they do be takin' up all the room," she exclaimed.

"Good mornin' to ye, ma'am," said Hector. "I'm just after sayin' to Norah it's a pity herself an' me wouldn't be seein' Patsy a bit on his way. I have that ould trailer to be takin' back to the shop in Galway, an' why wouldn't Norah go in it an' see the two of us off from there?"

Honor straightened herself and looked vaguely from one to the other.

"An' would you be goin' on with Patsy?" she asked.

"Oh, no, ma'am, I'll be havin' to take the train—myself and my bike—from Galway. It's behind time I am already, an' I'll have to make up for it that way."

"I could easy walk back, mother," said Norah eagerly. "I'd feel less lonesome that way nor I would if I was stoppin' at home an' seein' the two of them go out of this an' leavin' me behind."

"Och, maybe you would," rejoined her mother, looking at her with a certain wistful tenderness. "It's bad enough for the ould ones to be feelin' lonesome! It's fair-day in Galway, too," she added, "so ye'll have the fine chance of gettin' a lift goin' home from some of the neighbours."

At this moment Father Pat descended the ladder, and on being told the project expressed himself as well pleased thereat.

"I heard Mrs. Tim Noonan sayin' she was takin' her two little pigs to the fair," he added. "It's herself will be glad of Norah's company goin' back. In the ass-car she's goin', so Norah will have no need to be tiring herself."

"Och, I dare say I'll be glad to stretch my limbs,"

said Norah. "I'm not used to so much drivin'! Ye'd have me that stuck up if you was to be here much longer with your motors an' machines I'd think bad of settin' foot to the ground."

They all laughed: it was understood by common consent that whatever tears were shed in private, Father Pat's last meal at the family board was to be a cheerful affair.

"Is my father coming in?" asked the young priest.

"I have him dressed an' restin' on the side of the bed till the tay's wet," rejoined Honor. "Here, Norah, try can ye get this bag anyway shut for me? The kettle's b'ilin'!"

In a few minutes more they were all sitting round the table, eating, or trying to eat, Father Pat himself succeeding best, for though his heart was full he was prudently mindful of the long ride and the keen air, and the necessity of presenting himself at headquarters in good working condition. Burke himself leaned back in his chair, his shrunken figure huddled in his clothes, his large bright eyes fixed upon the countenance of his son. He was the only one whose face bore no traces of having wept. Father Pat, looking up once and encountering this intent and loving gaze, choked, and buried his face in his cup.

"The griddle-cake's too hard for ye," said Honor hastily to her husband. "Ye had a right to soak a bit in your tay."

"Och, I'm not carin' to be takin' anythin' to ate," rejoined he, "I'm content to be just lookin' at him. It's often I'll be lookin' at ye, Father Pat, an' ye sayin' Mass. Ye can be thinkin' o' that an' rememberin' my sowl."

Father Pat's tea took a great deal of drinking, but he set down the cup at last.

"I'll—I'll——" he said, and then broke off, diving

under the table ostensibly to pick up a crust which he had dropped.

Honor took advantage of his momentary disappearance from view to wink at her husband with both eyes together.

"We mustn't go upsettin' him," she whispered; "it's hard set he is to hould up, anyway. Sure with the help of God it'll not be long before he's back with us, Pat."

"Aye, maybe so," rejoined Burke, and then he looked at her with an odd smile. "It's me that'll have the most of him whatever way it is; it's me that'll be the nearest to him."

"Aye, true for ye," rejoined Honor in a low voice.

She made no further protest, realising the supreme comfort with which this old man, standing on the very brink of eternity, awaited the lifting of the veil which hides soul from soul.

She nerved herself, however, for the sake of the others—for poor Father Pat's face was very red when it appeared above the table, and Norah's eyes were large with tears—to talk of trivial matters with forced gaiety and interest. Of the pig-fair and Mrs. Noonan, of how a large contingent of people from the islands would be coming over for the event, of how Norah might as well be bringing back a trifle of tea and groceries with her.

She stirred her own tea vigorously while she spoke, and made herself very busy in attending to the wants of the rest, but no morsel passed her lips.

"Ye might put my chair by the door," said Burke presently, "the way I can be lookin' at them startin'."

"Maybe ye'll catch cold on me," said his wife tenderly.

"Ah, no," said he, "it's a lovely mornin' an' sittin' that long wouldn't hurt me, anyway."

When a little later the machines were brought

round, and the party assembled for the start, they found Burke enthroned on his threshold, wrapped in Honor's cloak and smiling cheerfully.

"Well, Father Pat," he said, "it seems no time at all since we were all gathered inside waitin' for your first blessin', an' now you're goin' from us to begin your grand work, it's me that'll give ye the blessin' now—aye, that will I."

He stretched out his feeble arms, and the young man with a sob fell on his knees beside him, burying his head in the folds of the cloak, beneath which he had so often nestled as a child.

"That the great God in Heaven may bless ye, my son," said Burke solemnly, "and prosper your holy work! Amen."

He leaned forward, raised the bent head and kissed the flushed, sunburnt face with solemn tenderness.

"And now be off with ye!" he said.

Father Pat got up, embraced his mother silently, and rode away without a backward glance.

"An' where's Norah goin'?" asked her father, turning his eyes upon her as she climbed into her place, her mother placing a sod beneath her feet.

"She's goin' as far as Galway with them—sure we were talkin' of it a while ago—she'll be comin' back with Mrs. Noonan after the fair."

"Well, God bless her too," said the old man dreamily.

"And here's Hector come to say good-bye to ye," went on Honor.

Her face was set like marble under its tan; there would be time enough for crying presently when she was alone.

Pat Burke extended his hand and Hector grasped it.

"I have to thank ye, sir, for all your kindness," he stammered.

"That'll do, that'll do," said Pat. "Take good care o' the little girl."

"I will so," said Hector.

Then he turned to Honor, clutching both her hands.

"It's a real mother ye've been to me," he said with deep emotion.

"Ye'll be comin' back," said Honor, and impulsively flung her arms round his neck.

The sound of Father Pat's hooter—a quarter of a mile away—reminded them of the necessity of departure, and Hector, getting into the saddle, started without further delay. Though he was in the company of Norah his heart was oppressed with a weight of sadness the like of which in all his life he had never experienced. It seemed to him there was something tragic in this parting, and he was conscious of a curious presentiment of impending disaster—of the three who had grasped the old man's hands and received his valediction, he was the only one who was suffered to depart unblessed.

CHAPTER XVI

EARLY though it was, the village of Cloon-na-hinch was all astir, not merely with people on their way to the fair, but with the neighbours who turned out to see them start and to prophesy good luck, or the reverse, to their intended dealings. These prognostications varied according to the precise degree of good-fellowship in which the neighbours lived.

Widow Clancy, for instance, whose hens had been "laying astray on her" for a long time, was disposed to look askance on the fine clutch of chickens which Peggy Nolan was bringing to market. And Murtagh Coneely, who, instead of picking out a bonnif (little pig) from the fine litter which Tim Linsky had offered for his selection, had chosen to bargain with a stranger from the islands at Spiddal Fair, and was now bringing the same, in an adult and imperfectly fat condition, to Galway, was jeered at for the adventurous and niggardly spirit which he had betrayed, not only by Tim himself, but by a variety of Tim's kinsfolk and cronies.

As the pig in question waddled from one side of the road to the other, or, with a challenging squeal, turned about and charged beneath the legs of some little rough-coated "beast," or slowly crawling donkey, the string by which he was attached to his owner entangling itself in hoof or wheel, the laughter of disinterested onlookers mingled with the objurgations of those more nearly concerned.

"Musha, bad luck to ye, Murtagh Coneely! Where in the world are ye goin' to, you an' your ould pig?

It's by the greatest chance in the world ye haven't myself and the little ass-car upset an' destroyed!"

This from the owner of the cart, a sturdy old dame who sat swathed in voluminous folds of flannel, while "the cloak" ballooned on either side over a variety of crates and baskets.

"Sure, the poor cr'ature is hidin' his head, ma'am," interposed a waggish young Linsky.

"Not at all," rejoined another; "he has the right sense, that same bonnif, an' he's strivin' to save himself the long journey, an' to go home again. Sure, he knows very well it's back he'll be comin', for I hear they're givin' no prices at all for skeletons at Galway."

"Skeletons, is it?" bawled Murtagh, emerging, scarlet in the face, from beneath the cart, having effected a rapid transfer of the rope from one hand to the other. "It ill becomes you to talk about skeletons, Johnny, with the face ye have on ye. Troth the skulls that does be dug up in the Seven Churches 'ud look handsome beside it!"

The laugh was now turned against Johnny Linsky, whose countenance did indeed present a somewhat cadaverous appearance, and Murtagh proceeded on his devious way, while the woman in the donkey-cart jerked her rope reins with the intention of resuming her progress.

The intelligent little beast between the shafts, whose mouth, long inured to such reminders, had attained a comfortable hardness, merely turned his head on one side, pricking his ears the while, for in truth an unaccustomed sound had reached them. Presently planting his forefeet firmly on the ground, he brayed amicably and loudly in response to what he took to be a friendly greeting from a brother beast of burden, and Father Pat, who had indeed been industriously sounding his hooter as he slowly threaded his way through the

crowd of men and animals, stopped short as he caught sight of the irate dame.

"It's yourself, is it, Mrs. Noonan?"

"It is that, Father Burke, an' it's glad I am to see you lookin' so well. You are goin' off with yourself now, I suppose. An' is it goin' all the way on that quare ingine, ye are?"

"I hope so," rejoined Father Pat dubiously; "it's apt to break down now an' again, but I'm starting early."

The donkey, which had by this time discovered its mistake, and had stood during this colloquy in apparently dejected silence, now began a series of premonitory snufflings, for indeed the sound of another motor-horn was audible at a little distance. Mrs. Noonan, however, administered a tap of her blackthorn which served to check the impending outburst, and in another minute Hector and the trailer had whizzed past.

"Goodness gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Noonan, "what in the world's that? It's bad enough to have the likes of the thing you're on whirrelin' past us, without havin' it draggin' another behind."

"I was just going to tell you about that," said Father Pat. "It's my sister Norah that's sitting behind. She's by way of keeping me company and seeing me off from Galway. Hector McTavish is taking her that far, but he's travelling straight home after, and she'll have to come back by herself, so I was wondering would you give her a lift in the cart here on your way back from the fair?"

"That will I, and welcome," rejoined she heartily. "I'll have all my chickens an' eggs sold by that time, an' there'll be room an' to spare. She'll sit elegant here on the crate beside me."

"Thank you," said Father Pat, "I'll tell her to be looking out for you."

He rode on, presently coming up with the others, who had awaited him by Norah's desire at the cross-roads, a little way beyond the village. Pat led the way again, and Hector forbore to grumble, though the scent of his petrol invaded their nostrils and the mud from his wheel splashed continually in his face.

The little procession continued to advance in the same order until they had reached and traversed the old grey town of Galway, on the farther side of which Pat was to leave them. He got off his machine to grasp Hector's hand, and then stooping over Norah, kissed her affectionately.

"I'm countin' on yourself to let me know how all goes on at home," he said, "and what way my father keeps. You're a comfort to us all, Norah, but it's time they had more help beyond there. You'll be taking a husband one of these days, and that'll be a good thing for them all. I'll be praying every day God may send you a good one."

He rode off, and they watched till he was out of sight, Norah waving her hand in response to his farewell signal as he turned the angle of the road, and then wiping her eyes.

They were quite in the country now, having indeed chosen to halt just outside the ivied wall of some demesne. Branches of larch with tiny tassels, and sticky crimson tufts giving forth delicious spicy fragrance, hung over this wall, and the firs which formed the greater part of the plantation gave place a little farther on to a group of wild cherry trees, with clusters of pearl-like buds just unfolding, and a few sparse, dark-hued leaves showing here and there. A thrush was singing, poised upon an upper branch, and the scent of moss and warm damp earth mingled with the savour of the larch.

Norah put her handkerchief into her pocket, pushed back her ruffled hair, and sighed.

"We'd best be makin' our way to the market now, I suppose," she said. "I'd better be waitin' there for Mrs. Noonan—I'm not used to towns, an' I'd be afeard o' my life to go tryin' to find her in that crowd."

Hector did not answer for a moment, then he said in a dreamy tone: "There's no such great hurry—it's early yet. I'd like to see thon town myself, before I leave it. The two of us 'ud see the sights twice over by the time the old body got there with her ass-car, and there's no use for us to be standin' for hours among the pigs and cattle waitin' for her."

"That's true," said Norah, and her face brightened.

"We'll take back this trailer first," resumed he, "and then we'll leave my bike at the station, an' then the two of us 'ull set out to see the sights, Norah. Why wouldn't I have a good last day as well as Patsy? I'm goin' back to work the same as he is."

"Well, I don't know what harm it 'ud be," rejoined she. "But I wouldn't like to be leavin' my poor mother for too long, for it's lonesome she'll be for Father Pat."

"I'll not ax ye to be too long," returned he gaily; "it's not nine o'clock yet; we have the day before us."

They wandered about the town for an hour or two, and then, being hungry, refreshed themselves at an eating-house.

"I think, now," said Norah, "I ought to be lookin' out for Mrs. Noonan. We have a long road to go, an' I wouldn't like to be missin' her. I noticed a good many o' the people seemed to be comin' away from the fair already."

"Mrs. Noonan'll only just have had time to get there," rejoined Hector. "She'll not have sold her eggs or chickens yet. Them that's leavin' the fair must have finished their business early."

But Norah, unsatisfied, turned to the girl who had served them and inquired if the fair were already over.

"Sure them's only persons from the islands," was the response. "They do have to be goin' off early on account of the steamer that's to take them back. It has to reckon with the tide, and they do be hard set to get rid o' their stock in time to catch it."

"Come on down to the harbour," cried Hector, turning eagerly to Norah. "It'll be the greatest fun to see them all goin' on board. An' thon harbour is a grand sight, anyway—ye oughtn't to miss it. I mind my poor father takin' me there once when I was a wee laddie."

On the way to the dock they overtook many people hurrying in the same direction. Stalwart men, picturesque in their homespun garments, the bawneens and stockings being blue, while the short loose trousers, slit at the ankles, were of the peculiar Aran mixture of indigo and cream. A vivid note of colour was introduced by the woollen sash which each man wore wound round the waist and tied behind, various bright hues of madder-red, yellow, green and blue being mingled in a symmetrical and striking design. Many of the soft felt hats which these lads wore were madder-red in colour, giving a curious exotic look to the dark faces beneath. The women and girls who swung along, stepping freely in their cowhide pampooties, were gay in their best red petticoats, while many of them wore lengths of white homespun flannel swathed about their bodies in lieu of shawls. All were talking eagerly in Gaelic, and Hector, more unaccustomed to the language than Norah, was struck by the musical cadence of their voices, and turned to the girl with a smile.

"I'm wonderin' if it's because you're so well used to speakin' Irish that your voice is so sweet," he said. "There's times when the commonest thing ye'd be sayin' sounds to me like poetry."

Norah was startled for a moment, and then, with the instinct to elude all approach to sentiment which had come to her more than once in the last few days, she said, laughing:

"It's little notion them ones has o' sayin' poetry. It's the little pigs they're talkin' about now, most of them. They're after sellin' the mothers at the fair, but each woman there has a little pig tied up in a bag to bring home an' fat."

"Well, that seems a quare way of doing business!" cried Hector. "Why wouldn't they leave the little ones at home to begin with?"

"Sure 'twould be the work of the world sortin' out the bonnifs, an' it 'ud be twice as hard to get the ould ones along. An' maybe some of these people are after buyin' bonnifs that hadn't any to sell. Look at that one now, nearly slippin' from under the girl's arm!"

Hector laughed as he noted the agitation of the sack in question, and observed how many similar ones were wedged beneath the stout arms of their owners as they trooped before them towards the gangway. Presently, however, he fixed his eyes on the vessel which lay rising and falling on the water, and a new idea came to him. He pulled out his watch.

"Sure it's only eleven o'clock," he said. "Why wouldn't you and me sail over to the islands the same as the rest? It's a lovely day and no sign of rough weather. We'd slip across in a few hours."

Norah stared at him.

"Why, how would we get back?" she asked.

"We wouldn't come back this way," he answered. "There does be hookers goin' over to the mainland often, an' if we couldn't get over in one of them, I'd aisy hire a curragh. I'll engage we'd be back at your place before Mrs. Noonan and her ass were half-way home."

"But I thought ye said ye had to go to-day," faltered Norah, bewildered.

"I'll walk back to Galway after leavin' you at home. I'll maybe catch an evenin' train, or, if not, I'll travel all night on my bike an' get on my road that way."

"But ye'll be kilt!" exclaimed Norah.

"Killed! Not a bit of it. I'm tough and not easy tired. It's little I'd care about bein' tired if I had the chance of a few more hours with yourself, Norah! Eh, but I'd like fine to be showin' ye the island. On a day like this it 'ud be grand. The wild birds upon the cliffs does be circlin' round your head, an' the sound o' the water tricklin' an' the sea rollin' in on the rocks—it's the finest music ever ye heard. I do be hearin' it in my dreams."

"Father Pat bid me come back with Mrs. Noonan," said Norah, with a trembling lip

"So you'll not do the one thing I ax ye?" retorted he bitterly. "I think ye might trust me enough to know I wouldn't want ye to do what was any harm. Pat only bid ye go back with the old woman because he didn't want to have ye trampin' the roads by yourself; but if I was to see ye home ye'd be all right."

Norah gazed at him irresolutely, and he bent his head down to hers with a passionate pleading in his eyes.

"I've never asked ye to do anything for me before," he said. "Ye'll not refuse me!"

She was too unsophisticated to realise the wildness of the plan proposed to her, a plan which Hector, in calmer moments, would never have suggested, but which, in his headlong eagerness, he now deemed natural and feasible.

He took her hand as he spoke, drawing her gently towards the gangway, and Norah, with a little sigh, yielded.

CHAPTER XVII

"YE'LL promise to bring me back before long?" said Norah presently as they stood side by side upon the deck. "Ye'll not want to be stoppin' too late over beyond, an' have my mother frettin' about me?"

"I'll only ax ye to take the one walk with me up to the cliffs where I was hidin' that time, an' then the two of us 'ull set off in the first curragh I can get."

Thus reassured, Norah began to look about her with lively interest, and presently to laugh heartily.

The deck was packed with a crowd of islanders of both sexes, the blues and greys of the men's attire mingling picturesquely with the reds and whites of the women's. A fresh wind got up soon after the vessel left the dock, lifting the women's hair and shawls; the brims of the men's hats, though these were securely tied on with string, cast flickering shadows over their eyes. The steamer rocked a little as it encountered the bigger waves, and the bags containing the bonnifs, which had been deposited on the deck to ease the aching arms of their proprietors, began to wriggle, and in some cases to roll about. Vast agitation ensued: the little pigs squealed, their owners argued and shouted in tones no longer musical, and the general din was presently dominated by two angry voices. A tall, stout woman, with flashing dark eyes, was exchanging what seemed to be uncomplimentary remarks with another, older than herself, and apparently less in earnest, for though she, too, raised her voice, her eyes twinkled,

and every now and then she interrupted herself to laugh.

"It's an argument they're havin' about their bon-nifs," explained Norah. "The little ould woman is after buyin' one in Galway, and the other's bringin' back her own that she took with her to the fair. Neither of them will give in that hers isn't the best. Look at that now!"

Both women stooped simultaneously, and each opening her bag, displayed the head and shoulders of its occupant. Friends and neighbours crowded round, some extolling the merits of the home-grown youngster, while others loudly declared that the newly acquired piglet was of superior quality. The hubbub was at its height when there was a shriek from the more imposing of the disputants, a simultaneous stretching out of feet and reaching of hands, and the island pig, more wily and possibly more active than its rival, slipped out of its wrappings, and scuttled hither and thither between the legs of the crowd. An indescribable tumult ensued, blue-and-red-clad islanders rushed about the deck, some on all-fours, some falling forward on their faces as they missed the elusive animal by just one curl of his tail. Sailors hurried up from below. Hector and Norah, infected by the general excitement, joined in the pursuit; the only two who remained in their places, continuing to argue with ever rising voices, were the original combatants. At last, with a shriek of indignation, the owner of the lost pig seized her adversary by the hair, and there was a momentary cessation of the pig-chase, for matters were assuming a serious aspect.

Suddenly, however, an old man climbed upon a fish barrel, and stretching out his hand to insist on silence, began to speak rapidly in Irish. A dead pause ensued, and the fiercer of the belligerents loosed with

a shame-faced expression her grasp of her enemy's hair. The old man continued his remonstrances in a mild tone, the soft Gaelic falling from his lips with a sweetness which was evidently as persuasive as it was musical, for presently the two women kissed each other with tears in their eyes, and as the bonnif was simultaneously caught by a cabin-boy of peculiar activity, harmony was entirely restored.

"It's the queer people ye are in these parts," said Hector, laughing, as he turned once more to Norah.

"Most o' them here is from Inishmaan," rejoined she. "They do be havin' their own rules there. I've heard tell any quarrel that's in it does be settled among themselves. There's no peelers in it, an' they wouldn't be botherin' their heads goin' to law the way some does be doin' over beyond in Galway."

"I think thon's the right way to settle things," observed Hector. "Every man has a right to differ from his neighbour, an' if you go ask the advice o' them that makes their livin' out of other people's quarrels, how can ye hope for peace? But we'll soon be in now."

But few of the passengers landed at Inishere, Norah's surmise being correct, and by far the larger number being bound for the middle island. Norah was somewhat taken aback to find that the steamer halted at a considerable distance from Inishmaan, a very fleet of curraghs lying in wait to receive them. If there had been a certain amount of excitement on leaving Galway harbour, it was as nothing to that which attended the process of disembarkation. A fairly strong sea was now running, and the steamer rose on the crests of the waves and then fell into the deep troughs after a fashion that rendered the island method of procedure extremely precarious. Men and women alike, however, leaped, first into the nearest of the flimsy-looking boats,

which lay tossing beneath the ship's side, and then from one to the other, until each had found the curragh which was his or her special property.

"Will any of you take a couple of passengers?" shouted Hector, holding up half-a-crown.

The remark was good-naturedly repeated in Gaelic and in stentorian tones by one of the vessel's crew.

For some moments nobody seemed inclined to respond to this appeal; the island-folk were too busy arranging themselves in their places and stowing away safely the bags containing the pigs; many were already pushing away the curragh which they occupied from those of their neighbours with their bladeless oars.

The sailor before alluded to repeated his query, adding to it, with a laugh, a few words which Hector did not understand. A responsive laugh, equally good-natured in tone, sounded from below, and a four-oared curragh, separating itself from its companions, was rowed over to the steamer.

"What was it he said?" asked Hector while this operation was in progress.

"Och, it was some nonsense of their own," returned Norah. But he noticed that her cheeks were hot and that she seemed startled. What the man had said was in truth: "Will you all have the heart to deny this fine young pair of sweethearts the day's pleasure they're looking for?"

But now the crucial moment for descending into the boat had arrived, and Norah, watching how the curragh pitched upon the water, clung in terror to her companion.

"Och, let's stop where we are," she gasped. "I could never be jumpin' that way!"

"Let you shut your eyes an' take the lep, my fine girl," advised the sailor, "an' them that's in the boat 'ull take care to catch ye safe."

"Will I take ye in my arms an' jump with ye thon way?" asked Hector anxiously.

"Och, I wouldn't be advisin' that," returned the man. "The both of yez 'ull have to keep your arms free the way ye can balance yourselves. But we'll tie a rope round the girsha's waist the way she'll know she can't be lost entirely."

The whistle was sounding, and the captain was impatient to depart. A rope was hastily tied round Norah's waist, and the injunction was repeated:

"Let you shut your eyes an' lep now an' ye'll be all right."

But when poor Norah made her terrified spring into space, the result was not as successful as was so confidently anticipated. A mighty wave caused the curragh to swerve simultaneously, and the girl fell into the middle of the green hollow between.

She was rescued almost before Hector, who was holding the other end of the rope, had time to haul at it, and was soon safely seated in the curragh, none the worse save for the fact of being drenched to the skin. She was naturally terrified at the disaster, and for a moment or two so much dazed by the impact of the water as to be incapable of forming definite thoughts; but presently she stretched out her hands from beneath the oilskins in which Hector was sedulously wrapping her and uttered a little shriek of dismay.

"The ship, Hector, the ship! Sure it's back to the ship we ought to be goin'! Sure how could I be walkin' about an' me wet through this way? I'd maybe find some way of dryin' myself there, an' I ought to be strivin' to get home, anyway."

"Let you sit still now," said one of the boatmen. "Sure you'd get your death waitin' for the steamer to be goin' back. She'll not be leavin' Kilonan till this

evenin'; and anyway, she's gone off with herself now an' wouldn't wait to pick ye up."

The vessel was indeed steaming away at full speed, the long ripple left by her progress adding to the commotion of the waves.

"There's houses in plenty in Inishmaan with good fires that ye can sit by, an' there's many that 'ud be glad to take ye in and do what they could for ye."

"Is there a woman called Sheila McMorrough livin' yet in these parts?" inquired Hector. "She was a kind woman. I mind thinkin' that when I was a child."

A curious glance was directed at him for a moment, but if these fisher folk had ever heard of his bygone sojourn on the island, they had forgotten it; and there would have been in any case nothing to identify the little half-drowned lad of long ago with the strapping, well-to-do young fellow who seemed so free with his cash.

"Sheila McMorrough is livin' yet, though her husband an' all belonging to her is dead, but the one little girl that's gone to be a nun on the mainland. Aye, she's hard set to live now, the creature. But you're right—she's the kind woman. Maybe you used to know her over beyond on the mainland? She was a girl from the Claddagh, I've heard tell. Aye, stranger, she'll be glad to do anything she can for the little girl."

"Cheer up, then, Norah," said Hector, leaning forward and tucking the wraps more closely round her. "Sure in no time at all ye'll be changin' your clothes, an' your own can be dryin' while we're takin' our walk."

Norah, who was feeling thoroughly cold and miserable, only smiled faintly at this prospect.

"I'm thinkin' we oughtn't to have come," she murmured. "Will ye ax them now if they'd be willin' to take us back home in a couple of hours?"

The request, when put somewhat unwillingly by

Hector, was promptly declined. The owners of the boat were fishermen, and would have to be afloat on the turn of the tide on business of their own. It was hard set they were to find time to row out to fetch Herself and the bonnif from the ship, and they had delayed above a bit in order to take the strangers on board.

"Herself," who was no other than the owner of the recalcitrant pig, and who had no English, sat majestically in the stern, her face set into serious lines, her dark eyes fixed on the approaching shore. She was probably thinking of the arrears of work which awaited her on landing, and which must be got through in haste that the menfolk might be fed before taking again to the waters. It would be useless to ask support from such a quarter.

"Don't be troubling your head that way," said Hector, frowning at the girl's anxious face. "There's plenty of time, and I can pay well. I'll easy get someone to take us across. But the first thing to be done is to get yourself warm and dry."

CHAPTER XVIII

HONOR stood in the doorway for a moment or two, gazing vacantly at the little cloud of dust which had been raised by Hector's machine and the trailer, and then, rousing herself with a start, turned to Pat.

"It's time ye come in out o' that," she said. "Ye'd do well, I think, to lie down on the bed and rest yourself. It's tired out ye are."

"Aye, I'd be glad of a rest," rejoined Pat submissively. "They're all gone now, and there's nothing for yourself and me to be looking at."

Honor gave a last forlorn glance at the empty road, at the hedge, on the budding green of which the dust was already settling, at the gate which had ceased to swing upon its hinges, and then stooped towards her husband, speaking with resolute cheerfulness:

"Well, there's plenty of work to be done anyway, inside and out, and it's time I was setting about it. Will I help ye in now?"

Already she had her sturdy arms about him and was lifting him from his chair. He clung to her unsteadily as she set him on his feet.

"I'll be glad of a rest," he murmured again.

They traversed the kitchen with slow steps, and Honor partially undressed him—her husband remaining passive as a baby in her hands—and then lifted him on to the bed.

"Go to sleep now," she said, as if he had been indeed a child.

He made an inarticulate rejoinder and closed his eyes.

Honor shut the door softly and stood for a moment in the middle of the kitchen, looking about her with eyes too deeply sad for tears.

There was the cup with the green rim in which a little while ago Father Pat had buried his face—his own cup which she had bought for him many years ago at Galway. And this was Hector's cup, decorated with red, but otherwise just like Pat's; she had made him a present of it on the same occasion, and had always kept it for his use. How long would it be before either was used again? She sat down on the corner of the settle, her face working, her thoughts busy with the past.

She saw them at their games, tumbling about the floor at her feet with shouts of laughter; or, again, sitting side by side before the winking turf fire, their arms round each other's necks, the black head and the red head pressed lovingly together, while little Norah toddled unsteadily about them, tumbling every now and then over their outstretched bare legs. In the mother's ears there still echoed the shriek, half mirth and half alarm, which greeted this catastrophe.

But those times were over for ever. The two lads had grown to men, each busy with his life's work. The baby Norah had vanished too. The Norah who would be coming back presently would be heavy-eyed and sad at heart for the loss of her comrades.

"It's very quiet we'll be now," sighed Honor. Then she rose quickly, and began to carry away the breakfast things with movements that were almost impatient.

"It's ashamed of myself I ought to be, me that's after getting my heart's desire, seein' my son a holy priest and myself and the Da hearing his first Mass and getting Holy Communion from his hand. Sure, what more could I wish nor that? And maybe Hector'll be back with us before long. He's kept the right

son's heart for me all these years, and why wouldn't he want to come and see us again?"

She finished washing up, and put away the crockery, fed the hens and pigs, and directed Billy Brophy's somewhat languid operations in the potato-field; Billy being one of those persons who consider that any stress of unusual emotion on the part of their employers justifies an immediate relaxation of zeal on their own part. Having broken in upon his meditations, impounded his pipe, and sent him back to his spade with a few vigorous remarks, she returned to the house and mounted the ladder to the loft.

It seemed only the other day she had made it ready for Pat's coming, and spread the newly washed sheets with such loving care upon his bed. As she stripped them off now it seemed to her that the bed still retained some of the warmth of her son's body. The pillow was certainly hollowed in the centre by the impress of his head. As she looked at it now she was caught unawares by a rush of tears. The dear black head! By a strange trick of memory it was not the tonsured head of her priest son which the words conjured up to her, but the downy head of the babe that had so often nestled to her bosom. Instinctively she curved her arms as though cradling a little form; she opened and closed her fingers, as she had so often done when little feet were within their grasp; she seemed to feel the play of the tiny toes curling and uncurling themselves in the warmth of her palm.

"It's daft and crazy entirely I am," she said to herself. "What will an old woman be botherin' her head about babies for, without it was grandchilder? I must be lookin' to Norah for that; and, indeed, it's time she was thinkin' of gettin' married. Pat was right there."

Father Pat had indeed given it as his opinion that

steps should soon be taken for the settling of his sister in life.

But Honor sighed as she spoke. Her affections were of an elusive order, and she looked forward with no great enthusiasm to welcoming a stranger in their midst.

"There's nobody hereabouts I'd be carin' for her to make a match with; but I'll be speakin' to Father O'Flaherty, and I might ask my brother to be on the look-out."

Though it seemed to her quite natural to follow the procedure which had been so successful in her own case, nevertheless, as has been said, the project was distasteful to her. It meant the admission of a stranger into the family circle, a man who must necessarily be master, owing to Pat Burke's infirmity, who would possibly institute changes, and who would certainly hold the highest place in Norah's affections.

"I'll be losin' them all," cried the mother passionately, and though she chid herself once again for selfishness and want of resignation, it was with a heavy heart that presently, having tidied the loft, she descended the ladder again, and having heated some milk for Pat, entered his room.

He lay gazing at the ceiling with wide-open eyes.

"Is Norah back yet?" he asked.

"She's not, and won't be for a good while. Think o' the length of time it'll take Mrs. Noonan and herself to come back all the way from Galway."

"I hope there'll be no fear of her missin' Mrs. Noonan beyond," said Pat. "Galway does be very crowded at fair times, and I wouldn't like her to be wanderin' about by herself. I question now if we done right to let her go off that way."

"Sure, hasn't she Hector with her?" returned Honor, "and didn't he promise to l'ave her safe in Mrs. Noonan's charge?"

"That's true indeed, so he did," observed the old man in a relieved tone as he took the cup from her hand.

"It's tryin' to get a bit of sleep you ought to be, and not be lyin' there troublin' your head about nothin'," resumed Honor.

"I dunno how it is, but I'm feelin' bothered about Norah," continued her husband, after he had taken a few sips of milk. "I think it was a quare notion to let her go whiskin' off with Hector in that outlandish trap that might aisy upset with her, and her brother not there to look after her."

"Och, sure, Hector will take the greatest o' care of her. Sure it's the very same as her brother he is."

"Aye," said Pat more slowly; "but it isn't her brother he is, woman. The thought come to me all at once, and me lyin' here. That young fella isn't her brother, and we done wrong in lettin' her go travellin' the country with him."

Honor laughed, the process seeming to lift the load of grief and care which had settled on her heart since the departure of the young folks.

"It's the quare, cranky ould man ye are to-day," she said, with a tenderness which belied her words. "Isn't Hector the child that I reared at my breast along with Patsy? Wasn't the two of them and Norah all the one family when he was little, and didn't he come back here the same as a son of the house? That's the very thing he is—a son of the house, and her foster-brother, if he isn't her right brother."

"That's true," said Pat, leaning back against his pillow with a relieved air; but he presently raised his head again.

"He's a Protestant, though," he said. "We mustn't forget that."

"Well, Father Pat himself was the devil's child before he was christened," retorted Honor. "Hector

was born a Protestant through no fault of his; but maybe he won't stop one. Didn't he kneel down with the rest of us to get Father Pat's blessing? And didn't he walk to Mass with Norah last Sunday?"

"So he did, so he did," admitted Burke. "Maybe you're right, woman, and 'tis the cranky ould man I am to-day! I'll try to get a sleep now, but I'd like you to be tellin' me the minute Norah gets back."

Honor withdrew with the muttered comment that it was a pity for him to be tormenting himself about the girl getting back, when he must know as well as herself that it would be hours and hours before they saw sight or light of her.

Nevertheless, his uneasiness infected her in spite of herself, and long before it was possible for Norah to return she herself might have been seen wandering between the house and the gate, and even strolling a little way up the road in the hope of descrying her.

It was late in the afternoon, however, before the first party homeward bound from Galway passed by, on its way to a hamlet a mile or two farther up in Connemara; a father and son driving a horse cart, the body of which was occupied by an old woman and a crate containing two young pigs.

Honor stepped quickly to the middle of the road and held up her hand, and the younger of the two, who was driving, jerked the rope reins and brought the rattling equipage to a standstill.

"Is it yourself, Mr. Deegan?" inquired Honor, addressing the old man, who sat gazing at her with somewhat bleared eyes. "I hope ye had good luck at the fair."

"Och, the prices was poor to-day—very poor; but welcome be the holy will of God!" returned he. "I didn't get as much for my two fine heifers as would pay the rent o' their grazin'."

"But you're after buyin' a couple of nice bonnifs," remarked Honor. "I wonder," she added, coming to the subject uppermost in her thoughts before he could reply, "if ye come across my little girsha an' you at the fair? She was in it this day. Herself and Mrs. Noonan is coming back together."

"Well, I'll tell ye no lie, ma'am; I did not see her then. But sure I might aisy miss her goin' about my own business. Did you see her, Mike?" he added, turning to his son, who sat chewing a straw and swinging his legs absently.

"I did not," said Mike.

Mrs. Deegan here protruded a ruffled grey head from the folds of her cloak.

"I seen Mrs. Noonan, though," she remarked, "and she tould me she was lookin' out for a young girl; but sorra one was in it with her."

"What time would that be, ma'am?" asked Honor anxiously.

"It 'ud be about three o'clock, Mrs. Burke. Aye, three o'clock it was, for I mind thinkin' to myself it was time we had the horse yoked and started back with ourselves, for it's a long way we have to go. But not a step could I get Himself to stir for me, on'y sittin' at Connor's, spendin' his good money on that dirty whisky."

"Will nothing satisfy you, woman?" retorted her lord angrily. "Am n't I after promisin' to take the pledge to-morra?"

"Och, and indeed it's time you took the pledge," resumed the irate dame. "It's a nice example you are to Mike there, and him with the pledge took since he was no height at all—and kep' too, mind that!"

Here Mike, who was apparently rendered somewhat bashful by this encomium, spat out the straw he had been chewing and jerked the reins, and the horse set

off once more at a shambling trot, the old couple still wrangling, while Honor, standing in the middle of the road, gazed anxiously after them.

A new fear began to creep into her heart, a fear quite different from the vague uneasiness which had before possessed her—the kind of uneasiness which may be likened to that of a hen clucking mechanically to the chickens, feeding, it may be, just outside the coop, safe and sound but out of reach. The fear of which Honor was now conscious took no definite form, but it drove the blood from her face and made her limbs shake as she turned at last to re-enter the house.

Pat's feeble voice hailed her from the inner room:

"Isn't that girl back yet?"

"She is not, and won't be for another couple of hours."

"I'm after hearin' a cart go past, then. Wasn't that Deegans' goin' home?"

"It was so, but the ould man had drink taken. I couldn't get sense out o' him."

"Honnie," cried Pat after a pause. His voice was shrill and quavering. His wife opened the door and peered in. The room was dark, but she could see the gaunt outline of his form sitting up in bed. "You'd best step down to Cloon-na-hinch and see if there's any sign of Mrs. Noonan comin' back yet."

"Och, I've no patience with ye! Isn't it a horse that Deegan drives? What way would Mrs. Noonan be able to get back so soon, her that has only the ass-car?"

"There's some from Cloon-na-hinch that drives horses as well as Deegan," rejoined her husband. "Be off with ye now and ax if any o' them has seen or heard anything about Norah."

The command coincided with Honor's secret desire. Surely some of the neighbours would be able to give her news of her child. Even if she had gone "stravagu-

ing" about the town instead of stopping quiet with Mrs. Noonan—a thing which seemed very unlikely, but still there was no knowing—surely someone would have caught a glimpse of her.

"Well, let you lie down and keep quiet like a good man. Ye can be saying your beads, if ye like. Sure the Blessed Virgin wouldn't let anything bad happen the poor little girsha. I'll go down to Cloon-na-hinch, but I'll not be expectin' to hear any news of Norah for a good while. Everyone's looking after their own business. They wouldn't be botherin' their heads about her, whether she was in it or not."

She took down Pat's brown rosary from a nail on the wall and handed it to him, watched him a moment as he sank back on his pillow, and then went out.

A good many of the Cloon-na-hinch people had indeed returned, and the bustle and excitement in the little place was even greater than in the morning.

Murtagh Coneely had sold his pig and was now surrounded by a group of friends who, amid loud jibes and uproarious laughter, were endeavouring to ascertain the price he had received for the same. Peggy Nolan was lamenting that it would have served her turn as well to have left her chickens at home, for the few shillings she was after getting for them wouldn't as much as pay for the meal she'd been giving them for so long; others had come back in a jubilant and, it must be owned, a slightly inebriated state. It was some time before Honor, making her way from one to the other of the little groups, could obtain a hearing, and then the answers were all unsatisfactory. Nobody had seen Norah, though more than one remembered Mrs. Noonan seeming a good deal put about because she had not joined her in the market-place.

"Are ye sure now?" said Honor with pale lips when this information had been imparted to her for the

third time. "Is it quite sure ye are that Mrs. Noonan said my little girl hadn't been near her all day?"

"That's the very thing she said, ma'am," returned her informant. "'I'm sick and tired lookin' out for her,' says she. 'I've sould my eggs, and there's no sense in me waitin' about till dark night overtakes us on the road. I'll give her till four o'clock,' says she, 'and if she isn't here by that time, me an' the little ass 'ull be leggin' back to Cloon-na-hinch,' says she."

"God bless us and save us!" ejaculated Honor. "Sure, what in the name of goodness can have happened her at all? The Da'll go wild; it's near out o' his mind he is already with her delayin' this way. I'm afeared o' my life they took the wrong road this mornin', the pair o' them. It was Hector McTavish that had her drivin' in one of them queer yokes—a trailer he called it."

"Aye, I mind seein' them whizzin' through this place this mornin'," returned the other, eyeing her sharply. "I was wonderin' to myself how ye come to let her go on that dangerous-lookin' thing, and with the young man that was a stranger ye might say."

"Och, no, ma'am; no stranger," put in Honor quickly, though the dryness of her tongue made the words almost inarticulate. "Hector McTavish is the same almost as my own son."

"Och, sure, woman; but isn't himself and his family out o' it this fifteen year an' more? Sure, what do ye know about him? It's a quare thing, anyway, wherever he took the girl to, that she kept Mrs. Noonan waitin' on her all them hours. Sure, she had her eggs sould before twelve o'clock."

"I can't think what in the world happened her," repeated Honor tremulously, "unless they took the wrong turn somewhere an' lost their way."

"Troth, 'twould be aisy for them to ask where Gal-

way town was, however far wrong they went," said the other. "And wasn't your son, the priest, goin' along with them to Galway?"

"Aye, that's true he was," Honor was beginning, when a slight stir was caused by the advent of a young fellow on a bicycle, who jumped off his machine as he approached them.

"Is that yourself, Mrs. Burke? I'm after bein' down to your place, and I'm afraid it's a fright I gave Himself. I went straight in with the message I had for you; but I wouldn't have shouted it out if I'd known how sick he was."

"What message was that?" asked Honor breathlessly.

"I'm after overtakein' Mrs. Noonan drivin' out from Galway in her ass-cart. It was just outside the town I overtook her—she'll not be here for two or three hours yet—and she bid me make haste home and tell ye that Norah never come near her all day, and she hasn't a notion at all of what can have become of her. She said she'd been axin' first one person and then another, and nobody could give any news of her at all, except one man that said he'd seen a girl like her, and a young man along with her, goin' towards the station."

"The station!" gasped Honor, and she reeled.

"Och, God help the woman!" cried the other dame, catching her in her arms. "Her heart's broke on her. Sure that black villain of a Protestant is after runnin' away with the girl."

"Ah, don't be sayin' those things," rejoined the young man. "Maybe the two o' them only went on an excursion. They'll be back yet. Don't be upsettin' yourself, ma'am. But ye had a right to be gettin' back to Mr. Burke. The room was dark, ye see, and when he called out to know what I wanted I tould him straight off, and he give a kind of a groan. I think

it's in a faint he is. I struck a light to see, when he didn't spake and it's the quare look he has."

Before he had finished speaking Honor was already staggering up the road. The neighbours looked compassionately after her and then shook their heads.

"It's the bad job," they said one to the other, and then a woman added: "But she brought it on herself, the creature! Sure that girl was runnin' about with the young fella mornin', noon and night, and him a Protestant. Dear knows what he's been doin' all the length of time he's been away. He may be a regular rogue and ruffian for all she knows."

"It's the rogue and the ruffian he must be, then," said the young man conclusively. "He's persuaded her to go off with him—that's what he's done. There's no excursions out of Galway these times. I only said that to paycify the mother."

"It's a black shame!" cried another. "He deserves to have every bone in his body broke on him! The dacent little girl, and the father not expected this length o' the time. To go choose the very day the priest was out of it to be up to his dirty tricks!"

Meanwhile Honor, bursting open the door, found Pat lying unconscious on his pillow.

CHAPTER XIX

SHEILA McMORROUGH was standing in the middle of her kitchen weaving, according to the primitive method in vogue at the Islands. She had fastened one end of the warp to the dresser, and the other to one of her boots, and was working backwards and forwards with her hand while a curious design of many colours grew on the narrow fabric.

Suddenly a shadow fell across the sunlit earthen floor.

"God save all here!" said Norah in Irish, and then she added timidly, "God bless the work!"

"Amen," said Sheila, "and God save you kindly, stranger; and you too," she added, catching sight of Hector behind.

Her face, aged though it was more than the mere passage of the years accounted for, was still comely and very sweet in expression, and the glance which she bent on the visitors was kind.

"It is wet you are, little girl? Is the sea so stormy, or did you slip and fall in when you were landing?"

"I fell into the sea when I was trying to jump into the curragh," returned Norah. "I'll be speakin' English now, if you've no objection, ma'am," she added in that tongue. "My friend here has no Irish."

"That indeed," said Sheila, also in English. "And what are you and your friend doin' here in Inishmaan, child o' grace?"

"We come over for the sail," returned Hector, answering for the girl. "But it's perished entirely she is in her wet clothes. I'd take it very kind of ye,

ma'am, if ye'd let her step inside with yourself and change into dry ones. I'd be able to pay well for the loan of them."

"I'm not one to ask payment for the like of that, stranger," rejoined Sheila in an offended tone. "You can be puttin' back your money in your pocket, for I'll not take it. Now, asthore, if ye'll step inside with myself I can be seein' to ye."

Laying aside her weaving, she led the way into an inner room, and opening an old wooden chest, took out sundry garments which she placed on the bed.

"Here they are now for ye, my little girl's things that I have laid by since she went to the convent. How old might ye be now, asthore?"

"I couldn't rightly tell ye, ma'am," answered Norah after a minute's cogitation. "I think it's twenty I was on Lady Day. No, but it's twenty-one, because Patsy—that's my brother—Father Pat I should say—is three year older nor me, and he couldn't be ordained till he was twenty-four."

"So ye have a brother a priest," said the woman, and her face lit up. "It's the proud girl ye must be, and your mother must be the proud woman, if she's alive."

"She is, thank God!" said Norah. "But we do be afeard my poor father's not long for this world."

"That's a poor case," rejoined Sheila. "But I'll go bail he felt he had his heart's desire when your brother was priested. It's myself had the wish to see one of my own little boys that same; but it wasn't the will of God, and sure they're makin' ready to welcome me where they're gone."

"An' ye have a daughter a nun, ma'am?" observed Norah.

"I have. It's about your age she is; that's why I was axin' ye. She's been above a year in the convent

now. Aye, it's six months since she got the habit—only the white veil, ye know. She won't be gettin' the black one for another year. I do be prayin' that I may live to see that day, though it's hard set I'll be to get as far as Armagh. Sure it's to Armagh she's moved an' that'll be a long way for me to travel that's never been further nor Kilronan and Galway."

She broke off, sighing, and then, bending over the chest, took out a parcel carefully wrapped up in a clean cotton handkerchief.

"Look at here now, asthore. These is my two treasures. These are my little girl's curls that was cut off her head the day she took the veil. Aren't they lovely now? Feel the weight of them, and see the way they do be curlin' yet, though it's that long since they were took from her head. Aye, I used to be proud of that hair; there wasn't another girl on the island had the like of it. I knew they'd be cuttin' it off, an' I axed for it. Aye, it's lovely she looked that day—dressed as a bride so she was, and her hair done up lovely under the wreath and veil; an' then, when she come in in her habit she had the curls hangin' over her arm, an' she threw them down on the altar steps the way she'd show how little she cared for the loss of them or anything else in the world. Och, it was the happy girl she was that day, an' it's happier still she'll be when she has her last vows taken an' is settled beyond for life. I hope I may be able to go see her professed."

"Indeed, I hope you will, ma'am," said Norah, who had been busily engaged meanwhile in peeling off her wet garments and putting on the others. "But what is it ye have tied up so light in the corner of the handkerchief?"

"It's my mother's weddin'-ring—the Claddagh ring. Maybe ye'll have seen the like often enough, but we

do be thinkin' a deal of it. It's from the Claddagh I come myself, and the way 'tis with us it goes down from mother to daughter for years and years. My mother was alive the time that myself and my poor husband got married—God rest his soul!—and she thought bad of partin' with it, so he bought just an ordinary ring for me, an' I could never bear to take it off my finger, because it was himself put it on. So I kept this for Maire. If she'd got married it's that ring she'd have had upon her finger. But she'll belong to no man now, an' so I have it laid by, and there's times I do be thinkin' to myself that maybe I might be sellin' it the way I'd be able to get the price of my journey to Armagh, to see my little girl take her vows. But there's no sort of price for them things in the Islands, so I'll have to wait till somebody from here 'ud be goin' to Galway and let them see if they could sell it for me there."

Norah took the ring, a fine specimen of its kind, representing a heart clasped by two hands and surmounted by a crown.

"It seems a shame to be talkin' o' sellin' it," she said.

"Aye, it does that. But what good would it be keepin' it to take with me in the coffin? There's none to come after me. I do be managin' to wrangle on from one day to another. I've no one to work for me, but somehow or other I've never wanted for a crust yet. And when I die the neighbours 'ull bury me, an' my little girl 'ull be prayin' for my sowl, so if I can get to see her on her great day, that's all I'll be axin' for in this world. Well, ye're dressed now, alanna. Come, we'll put your own clothes to the fire, and I'll pop on the kettle to boil, the way ye'll get a warm drink after your wettin'."

But when they re-entered the kitchen, Hector decided that it was better to set off for their ramble

without any further delay, adding that Norah could be taking her tea while he went to make inquiries about the hire of a curragh.

Norah paced along by Hector's side with a rather serious face, for her heart was filled with compassion for Sheila, the woman who was so brave for all her poverty and loneliness. By and by she began to talk to Hector about her and about the Claddagh ring, and how Sheila was thinking of selling it, though it was the last treasure she had, in order that she might be able to pay for the journey which must end in a final separation from the only child left to her. The young man heard her in silence, and with the peculiar darkness of expression which sometimes overspread his face, when he found himself unable to sympathise with the views or emotions of those about him. He listened more attentively, however, when Norah spoke of the Claddagh ring, and presently interrupted her.

"Aye, I mind seein' a ring like that once in a pawnshop. A weddin'-ring d'ye say it is? I'd like fine to buy it from the woman myself if she'd sell it to me."

"Would ye?" exclaimed Norah, stopping short to look at him.

"That would I," insisted Hector. "It 'ud be a fine weddin'-ring. Two hands holdin' the one heart. That's the right ring for a marriage."

"You are able to do a lot with your money," said Norah, and for some reason or other she felt vexed with Hector. "It was able to give half a crown to the boatman you were, and you were offering to pay Mrs. McMorrough just now for the loan of these things, an' now it's to buy her mother's weddin'-ring you want."

"And why wouldn't I?" returned Hector. "Don't ye tell me yourself the woman's anxious to sell it?"

"I don't know that she's anxious to sell it at the present time," said Norah,

They climbed up the slippery rocks with their unexpected and vivid patches of vegetation. Little streams, caused by the recent rains, were dripping from ledge to ledge, and as they climbed higher, the seabirds spoken of by Hector swooped and circled about them. Hector, however, forbore to call the girl's attention to these things. His eyes were fixed on her as she walked a pace or two in front of him, now balancing herself when the stones grew rough and pointed, and sometimes leaping from one to another. But she was somewhat hampered by Maire McMorrough's pampooties which had been lent to her in lieu of her own soaked footgear, and stumbled more than once. Presently, indeed, she tripped, and would have fallen but that Hector caught her. As he held her a moment to steady her, he saw that her eyes were full of tears.

"What in the world's upsettin' ye this way?" he asked.

"I think it's a quare thing, an' us such friends, ye never said a word about gettin' married," said Norah, with a sob. "You were goin' on bad enough about my match, an' no talk of it at all yet. There's yourself goin' to buy the ring, no less, an' never a word out of ye till now about the girl you're takin' for a wife. I think ye might trust me that much, you that's the same as my brother."

She was about to wrench her elbow free, but Hector held it fast. His eyes were shining, and his voice trembled when he spoke.

"But ye see this is the way it is, alanna," he said very gently; "I'm not your brother."

"Well," pursued Norah, still in a wounded tone, "we was friends, anyway; ye'll not be denyin' that."

"I'll no deny that," rejoined he. "But maybe I'm not satisfied with it. Maybe I want yourself and me to be more than friends, Norah."

She turned completely round and faced him, pale now, and with dilated eyes.

"What is it you're sayin'?" she gasped. "Are you wantin'—are you meanin'——"

"I'm meanin' that if I buy thon ring, it's on your finger and no other that I'll put it, my darlin'," said Hector. "It's yourself that's been in my mind ever since I come here, and if I'm to have any wife in this world it'll be you."

Norah stood swaying a little and looking at him inquiringly, as though trying to grasp the idea; then she said falteringly:

"I don't think maybe ye ought to be talkin' to me that way. I don't know what my mother 'ud say or my Da, or Father Pat. Sure, it was the son of the house they were all makin' ye out to be."

"It's the son of the house I want to be, well," said Hector. "Sit down a bit an' get your breath. I have ye frightened."

Norah sat down on a slab of rock, clasping her hands round her knees and looking, not at Hector, but seawards, her brows slightly knit and her lips moving. There seemed to be an upheaval of all her little world, and she felt for the moment utterly bewildered. Hector knelt down beside her, trying vainly to look into her eyes. Presently he said, with something that was almost a laugh:

"Ye can't bring your mind round to the notion at all, can ye? But to me the surprisin' thing is that none of ye thought of it before."

"And when did ye think of it yourself, Hector?" said Norah, turning at last and looking at him.

She asked the question in all simplicity, and was surprised to see the colour rush into his face.

"To tell ye the truth—an' I wouldn't be tellin' ye anything else—it was only yesterday I made up my

mind out and out. But from the minute I seen ye, Norah, ye had me"—he paused, and added with a laugh which cloaked a very deep emotion—"bowled over."

As she gazed at him, flushing, he added tenderly: "Ah, ye don't be understandin' my queer talk. What I mean is I lost my heart to ye. Ye stole it from me, and I loved ye as I never thought to love any girl in this world."

"Did ye?" said Norah.

She, too, tried to laugh, but presently a sob came. "Och, Hector, I don't like to be talkin' that way! I—I do be feelin' afeard to have ye lookin' at me that way."

"Afeard!" cried he.

He laughed again, this time exultantly. "Aye, ye're afeard o' bein' caught, ye little white bird, caught and caged, the way I'll cage ye one of these days with the help of God. But I'll say no more to ye now; you're not used to that sort of talk, but you'll not mind it after a bit. You'll know it's only Hector, your old playfellow, the son of the house, as you called him just now, that wants to be the son of the house in earnest. Sure, that's all in life I am. One that loves ye an' 'ud work for ye, an' ax no better nor to do the best I can for yourself an' your family. Aye, that's another thing ye can be thinkin' about. I'd maybe be able to do more for your family than many another man."

"Maybe you would," said Norah faintly.

In her dazed condition of mind she was unable to look so far ahead.

"So I'll say no more to ye this time," he went on. "Ye can just be thinkin' over those things, an' ye'll be gettin' more used to them. An' I've a notion now I won't go travellin' back to-night after I bring ye home, but I'll stop at your place the way I can be havin' a talk with your father."

"Aye," said Norah, with rather more alacrity, for she was relieved at the idea of the responsibility being shifted from her own shoulders. "Ye'd best hear what my Da says first. An' wouldn't ye think now," she went on, "we had a right to be gettin' back? I can't walk so very well in these pampooties, an' my knees is tremblin' under me. I—I—it's wake I'm feelin', Hector. You are after makin' me feel altogether upset."

Two big, piteous, childish tears rolled down her cheeks as she spoke. Hector clenched his hands in the effort to restrain the longing to fold her to his heart. Never had she seemed to him so adorable as now, when, amid her seeming childishness, he divined her maidenly shrinking. The strength and passion of his own nature were allied to a certain fineness of perception, which enabled him to compassionate as well as to respect the tumult of this innocent soul. No ardour such as his had ever approached Norah. She was unable, as yet, to realise, much less to respond to it. But he loved her better thus—the white bird which no man's hand had grasped but which would presently perch on his.

"Sit here awhile and rest yourself," he said tenderly. "I'll not be sayin' anything to scare ye. Sit quiet till ye get your breath. It's the grand day, so it is. Aye, it's a fine view of the sea we have from here. That's the great Atlantic Ocean over yon to your right. Thon's worth looking at—all the miles an' miles of water—nothin' but water between us an' America."

Norah craned her neck and looked forth, a little reassured by the change in his tone. Yonder far, far beneath themselves, were the tumbling waters. The music of them came to their ears, rising every now and then to a roar as a particularly large wave broke upon the rocks, casting up a shower of spray.

Presently she exclaimed: "Look at all the boats goin' out. Did ye ever see such a lot? I think it's time

we went down and made sure of gettin' one, else maybe they'll all have sailed away on us an' we'll have no means of gettin' back home. Aye," she added, springing to her feet in alarm, "it's time we saw to it. Didn't one of the men that rowed us over tell us they was all goin' out fishin' this evenin'?"

"He did so, but they don't mostly be out so early," said Hector. "But we'll go down as soon as we can now and make sure."

He scanned the fleet of brown-sailed hookers with some anxiety, and Norah's alarm increased.

"Run down, quick!" she cried. "Don't be waitin' for me at all. I'll find my own way."

"I don't like to be leavin' ye by yourself that way," said Hector. "Ye slipped once or twice before; ye might aisy catch your foot in one of the holes between the rocks and break your ankle."

"Och, don't be thinkin' about me. I'll promise to take care of myself," cried she, wringing her hands. "Run down, for pity's sake! Sure, nothin' so bad could happen to me as to be left here on the island and have my father and mother breakin' their hearts about me."

"Well, well, I'm goin'," said Hector. "Take your time now, an' when ye get down, go and wait for me at Mrs. McMorrough's house. I'll not be back for a bit, maybe, for if I can't get anyone to take us in a hooker, it's a curragh I'll have to be searchin' for."

He began to run down the slope now, leaping over the cavities, his well-knit figure and great strength enabling him to preserve his equilibrium even in slippery and precarious places. Norah followed more slowly, for the jagged stones hurt her feet and the unaccustomed pampooties hampered her; but she ultimately regained Sheila's cottage, where she awaited Hector's return in anxiety and growing alarm.

CHAPTER XX

"YE'LL be hard set to find anyone to take ye across this evenin'," said Sheila. "Them that's come over from the fair 'ull be in no hurry to be goin' out again, an' them that wants to go fishin' 'ull not let anything else interfere with it."

"But Hector 'ud be able to pay them well," faltered Norah.

"Och, they don't be carin' very much for money hereabouts," rejoined the woman of the house. "They'd sooner carry out a job they'd made up their minds to. If it's fishin' they want to go, it's fishin' they'll go. But ye needn't be breakin' your heart that way, alanna. Sure ye're welcome to stop here with me till to-morrow, or maybe next day, when ye'll get a chance of goin' back on the Galway steamer. It's three times a week it does be comin' now. If ye're not used to bein' on the water that 'ud be the best way for ye to go back. The say does be very rough this time o' year, an' many's the storm we do be havin'."

"I don't know what in the world my mother 'ull say," exclaimed Norah. "It's little I'd care for the danger if only I could get home in the end. She won't know what in the world's become of me, for I never as much as sent word by Mrs. Noonan that was to have brought me back by the ass-car."

"Oh vo!" said Sheila. "I wonder ye didn't think o' doin' that now; but young people does be thoughtless."

"It was all in a minute, ye see," explained Norah.

"We only went down to look at the ships, an' then Hector took the notion of sailin' over to the island, an' I didn't like to go disappointin' him."

Sheila came and stood beside her in the doorway.

"Tell me now, honey," she said after a pause, "what way it is between you and this fine young man? Is it goin' to get married to him ye are?"

"I don't rightly know," returned Norah. "He's after sayin' something about it a while ago. Och, I wish I was back home with my mother!"

"Well, don't be frettin'," said the woman of the house kindly. "Sure, maybe the young man 'ull be able to persuade some of the boys to take ye across, an' if not it's myself 'ull take the best of care of ye. I suppose now, since it's only a while ago he was talkin' to ye about gettin' married, he hasn't spoke to your father yet?"

"He has not," replied Norah vaguely, "but he was sayin' somethin' about mentionin' it to him to-night, when we got back."

"Och, well, he can't do better than that," said Sheila.

She remained thoughtful, however, and no further word was spoken until Hector's springing step was heard on the stony path without, and presently his tall figure halted in front of them. His face was so bright and glowing that Norah joyfully clapped her hands together.

"You were able to get the boat after all!" she exclaimed; but Hector shook his head.

"I was not," he rejoined. "I've been the rounds of the place and ne'er a one can I find that's willin' to put to sea this night. Most of them's gone fishin', an' them that's left won't stir, no matter how I try to persuade them."

"Maybe ye wouldn't be too late to catch the steamer

at Kilronan yet, if ye could get anyone to row ye across to the big island," suggested Sheila, noticing that Norah was unable to speak.

"I thought of that," returned Hector. "But they say with the wind in this quarter there'd be no chance of us gettin' over quick enough, and more by token it wouldn't be safe. But it's that way we'll have to go back most likely. The day after to-morrow the steamer 'ull be here again."

"The day after to-morrow!" ejaculated Norah, turning very pale. "Och, Hector, my heart's broke! Sure it'll be the death o' my Da! They'll be expectin' me all day; if I'm not back to-night they'll think I'm lost entirely."

"They'll know you're safe in my care," said Hector. And he looked at her with a kind of proud joyousness.

"Upon my word I see nothin' to take such a conceit of yourself about," remarked Sheila dryly. "It's not very much to your credit, young man, to get any poor girl in such a mess as this."

"D'ye think I did it on purpose?" cried he angrily. "I give ye my word I was as anxious to get back as herself; but since I find we can't get back through no fault of mine, there's no harm in bein' glad to think I'm stoppin' here with her and 'ull be havin' her company the next two days instead of travellin' off from her the way I expected. Come, ma'am, I dare say ye see the way it is with us. You were young yourself once. Aye, I'll go bail ye haven't forgot the time you an' your fine husband was courtin' each other. I'll be lookin' for a bit of feelin' from ye."

"My fine husband!" repeated Sheila slowly.

She straightened herself, gazing narrowly at the young man, the pupils of her eyes contracting as though with some secret effort of memory.

"You're right," she went on, still gazing at him.

"My husband, Brian McMorrough, was a fine man. He'd have to stoop an' he comin' in at the door, an' he was able to throw every man on the island. But how did you, that's a stranger, know he was a fine man?"

"Because he carried me in his arms up from the sea once when I was a wee lad," returned Hector, "an' he laid me on thon table yonder," pointing past her into the room. "I was stunned at the time; but when I come to my senses I seen him standin' there by the hearth, and his big shoulders stretchin' very near across it."

Sheila gazed at him, and then clasped her hands.

"Aye, aye; I mind it, though many's the year since it happened. Aye, sorrow came into the house that night with yourself, stranger, though maybe it wasn't you that brought it. That was the night the last little boy I had sickened on me, an' it wasn't long after that he was dead."

She looked at him now with a sort of shrinking that was half fear and half dislike.

"Mrs. McMorrough," said Hector, "if misfortune came to your house, it wasn't through any will of mine, an' that I'll swear. An' it didn't come to you alone; the troubles of my own life began that same night."

"Aye," said Sheila softly. "They druv ye out; I mind it well. The ould woman that was in it then, my husband's mother, wouldn't let ye stop in the house."

"Aye; but you were good to me," struck in Hector. "I'd have perished with cold and hunger that night if ye hadn't come after me and brought me my clothes and my supper."

"I mind that," said Sheila thoughtfully. She looked from one to the other and then sighed. "Well, come in, come in and sit down. I'll get the two of yez a

bit to ate now, an' the little girl can stop here with me; but you must go look for a lodging, my fine young man."

"What?" said Hector, as he followed her indoors. "Are ye still afeard o' me bringin' bad luck to ye?"

"No," said Sheila gravely. "But ye had a right to be thinkin' about herself here. It's a quare thing ye're after doin' to be bringin' her away from her family an' you not sayin' a word to anyone, an' they not knowin' where she is. An' what ye must be thinkin' about now is her good name. Ye must be takin' all the care in the world to give no one the chance to be thinkin' bad of her for what yourself done this day."

Hector stopped short as if thunderstruck, and Norah looked from one to the other, only half comprehending, but terrified.

"Troth, they'd have hard hearts to think bad of either of us for what we couldn't help," said Hector huskily at last. "Anyone that knows me knows I'm no blackguard. Her mother left herself in my care, an' she knows I'd die sooner nor let harm come to her."

"Well, ye can be provin' that now," said Sheila somewhat dryly. "Ye can sit down and take your tay with the two of us, an' then ye may go out an' find a lodgin'. An' another time when people is trustin' ye, ye'd best not be jumpin' at the first bit o' pleasure that ye fancy, but ye can be thinkin' how will it end! But come in an' I'll do what I can for ye."

The young couple sat on either side of the hearth, while their hostess made preparations for the meal. Norah cried softly to herself a little, and Hector gazed into the fire, not gloomily, but thoughtfully. Presently, looking up, he intercepted the girl's glance, half appealing, half reproachful, and leaning across, breathed a few words towards her.

"Whatever thon woman says, Norah, ye'll no doubt me?"

She shook her head.

"I know ye didn't mean it," she whispered.

"An' you'll trust me to do what's best for us both now," he went on.

"Aye," said Norah, "I'll trust ye. I'll trust ye to take me home as soon as ye can, Hector."

He straightened himself then and said no more, and presently Sheila summoned them to the table.

A somewhat silent meal ensued. Sheila continued to eye Hector with a critical, it might almost be said an inimical gaze, which he would have resented had he not been absorbed in his own thoughts. These were not of a melancholy order; on the contrary, his eyes were shining, and he glanced at Norah ever and anon radiantly, the pent-up joy within him leaping out as their eyes met. But she, poor child, was entirely taken up with regret for her own folly in having embarked on the expedition, and misgivings as to the effect which her delay in returning would produce at home.

At length Hector rose to depart.

"Well, I'd better be off with myself before Mrs. McMorrough drives me out," he said, with a smile.

"Aye, you'd best be goin'," rejoined she. "Ye'll find a lodgin' down below at Moher."

"Good evenin' to you, ma'am," said he. "Good night, Norah. Pleasant dreams to ye! It's the grand dreams I'll be havin'."

"Good night," said Norah.

She watched him go out of the door and then turned to Sheila.

"My mother will be standin' at the gate lookin' out for me, God help her! Will you let me be washin' up the tea-things for you, ma'am? It's best for me to be stirrin' about and not thinkin' too much."

"Aye, but it's well to think sometimes," said Sheila, in her deep melodious voice. She was still sitting at the table, resting her elbows on it, her chin being sunk on her hands. "If ye'd waited a minute to think before ye agreed to go on the steamer with the young man, ye wouldn't be in this trouble now. Let you be thinkin' an' thinkin' well before you give that same young man your promise."

"Sure, it's my father that'll be settlin' it," said Norah wearily. In her state of mental and physical exhaustion she felt unable to grapple further with the matter.

She began to pile the cups and saucers together, and presently looked towards her hostess again, this time with a little resentment.

"What is it you have again' him?" she asked.

"I've this much again' him," said the elder woman: "He hasn't learnt to bless himself yet! Neither before he sat down to begin his tea, nor after he swallowed the last drop, he wouldn't make the sign of the cross. Now that's no way for a young man to be goin' on that want's to be marryin' a girl like yourself, asthore."

"He's a Protestant," said Norah.

"Musha, isn't that what I'm sayin'? And will you be tellin' me it's a right thing for a Catholic girl to go pickin' out a Protestant for her husband when she has the whole o' Connemara and Galway itself to choose from?"

"Sure I didn't pick him out," said Norah plaintively. "'Twas himself was talkin' of it."

She broke off and stood for a moment, absently pouring the dregs of tea from one cup to the other. Her own words had conjured up a vision of Hector's face as it had been bent towards her yonder amid the sunlit rocks. She could see his eyes with the unaccustomed glow in them, and his red locks lifted by the

breeze; and some scarcely understood impulse made her add: "But I like him very well, and he's very near a Catholic."

"Is he that?" said Sheila in a relieved tone; and she lifted her head with a smile. "That's a different story altogether."

"He knelt down with the rest of us to get the first blessin' from my brother the priest," went on Norah rapidly, "and he come to his first Mass with us, and he come with us again on Sunday. He never went next or nigh the Protestant church while he was with us, though his father was gardener to the parson that's in it for a length of time."

"Did he say anythin' about becomin' a Catholic though?" asked Sheila.

"He didn't yet; but I think he would if I axed him," returned Norah with conviction. "I can mostly make him do everything I want."

She smiled to herself now, but Sheila shook her head.

"Well, don't be doin' anythin' in a hurry. You'd best speak to the priest first when you get home, and see what he says."

"I will," said Norah.

Oddly enough, she was not so much disturbed by Sheila's hint as might have been expected. She had never heard the warnings and arguments against mixed marriages which are customary in other parts of Ireland, for the simple reason that in the neighbourhood of her home all professed the same faith. The reading of the "Ne Temere" decree, and any subsequent allusion to that matter in the bishop's pastorals, had passed unheeded over the heads of a congregation whom it did not concern, and Norah therefore understood very imperfectly the attitude of her hostess, who, though she had lived many years on Inishmaan, still retained the memory of Galway traditions. In some

curious fashion the opposition of the woman of the house roused up a sense of championship in Norah. Hector was no more to be blamed than herself for their actual plight; he could not have guessed that there would be no means of returning to the mainland. And as for his being a Protestant, that wasn't his fault either, poor fellow. He would soon "learn the differ," and what could he do better than show himself willing to take up with Catholic people and to learn Catholic ways?

CHAPTER XXI

THE wind rose during the night, and when Hector appeared in the morning he announced that his prophecy of the day before had been verified.

"I've been round makin' inquiries to satisfy ye," he said to Norah, "but there's not one that would consent to take us across this day. And ye couldn't blame them, the waves are as big as houses."

"It's to be hoped the wind 'ull go down by to-morrow, then," said Sheila. "It 'ud be a bad thing if ye couldn't catch the steamer to-morrow."

"Aye, it 'ud be a quare thing," said Hector with dancing eyes. Then, turning to Norah, he continued with great animation: "Will you come out with me now, and we'll go up to the top of Dun Conor? We can be lookin' at the sea all round from there, and we'll be able to find out if there's any chance of it gettin' calmer."

"I'll go inside and put on my boots," rejoined the girl rather listlessly.

"Aren't you the queer fellow," said Sheila to Hector after she had gone, "to be leppin' with joy the way you are, when every hour that's passin' is addin' to the trouble you're bringin' on herself there and her family?"

"It's not my doin' that the wind and the waves is fightin' again' our goin' back," retorted he. "That's the way it is, and it's no fault o' mine; and why wouldn't I be glad at the thought of havin' her to

myself in this bonny place for a while? It's blood that's runnin' in my veins and not water. Did your own heart never lep within you when you were young and you had the one you loved to yourself?" he added, remembering that the same argument had moved her before. It was not without effect now.

"Aye," said Sheila softly. "And it was seldom enough I got my man to myself, for his ould mother was in it most of the time and we young."

"Then do you be thinkin' o' that," said Hector persuasively, yet with a hint of the resentment he was holding in check. "Let you not be strivin' to come between the two of us. I'll give you my word I'm meanin' nothin' but right to the girl and her family. I've money laid by that'll be the good help to them with their farm, and it's to her father I'll go the first minute I'm able."

Sheila looked at him half doubtfully, half approvingly. A further remonstrance hovered on her lips, and she debated within herself as to whether it would be wise to remind him now of the chief obstacle to his desire, or whether it would be better to refrain, lest by premature speaking she might lessen Norah's own chance of successfully pleading her cause.

While she still hesitated, the girl herself returned, having put on her boots and assumed her shawl, and the young couple walked away together.

The ascent to Dun Conor, the magnificent ancient fort which dominates the island, is somewhat steep and difficult, and little was said until they arrived, breathless, on the top, and paused to look round.

The sun was shining bright and hot, though there had been a heavy shower recently, and fleecy white clouds were still scudding across the blue overhead. The wet stones gleamed, and the ferns and grasses which grew between them, beaded with moisture as

they were, scintillated in the light. Below them on all sides were the mighty waves, roaring and leaping like giants at play. The strong wind, which made hair and garments stream, brought the salt to their lips. They found it difficult to keep their footing as they stood against the blast, and Hector caught Norah to steady her, shouting words that she could not hear. His face was exultant, the coppery hair blowing back from his brow.

Presently, still holding her hands, he drew her down behind the shelter of the wall, and seating himself beside her on the moss-grown stones, watched her face as she began to breathe more easily. The great wind tore past, screaming, but here they were safe from its fury.

"The sky over our heads," said Hector, stooping to her ear that she might catch the words, "and the sea below at our feet, and the two of us alone! I'd ax no better than this. We might be the only man and woman in the world, mavourneen."

"We might so," said Norah, infected by his mood.

"An' I'm goin' to be tellin' you the same things that the first man said to the first woman," he went on. "Did you ever wonder what they said to each other when they were sittin' side by side in the garden?"

Norah looked down, colouring.

"Ye may be sure," he went on, laughing to himself, "it must have been the very same things that many a man has said since to the girl he loved. Maybe 'twas himself told her first she was bonny; there were no lookin'-glasses in them times."

"There must have been water, though," said Norah, entering into the idea.

"Aye, she'd have seen her face in that," resumed Hector. "The streams and pools round Cloon-na-hinch 'ull have told you that tale, ashore."

He watched her as she stripped a tuft of moss from the wall and threw it away. "An' you have the same glory that belonged to our first mother—you're comin' to me straight from the hand o' God, Norah. Aye, there's no other man to come between yourself and me. I'm the first to be tellin' you I love you."

If the knowledge of her own beauty were not new to Norah, *this* was new. No other man indeed had ever spoken of love to her. Even the romances with which other girls of her age feed their imagination had never fallen under her hand. Her home was too remote, and her parents' views were too old-fashioned to admit of her taking part in such gatherings of young folks as the somewhat strict rule of Father O'Flaherty permitted in the neighbourhood. She had never joined in dances at the cross-roads, or stood up with a lad to jig it on some uneven earthen floor. When in her childhood she had listened to the tale, odd mingling of fairy-lore, religious tradition, and romance, which sometimes fell from the lips of a chance visitor, or hearkened to her mother crooning some Gaelic love song as she moved about the house, these fell on her ear as the rhythm of the waves from the sea, and held no more meaning for her than the conventional fairy-tale holds for the average child. Does any little one pause to consider the ardour with which the prince approached Cinderella, or the longing with which the princess presumably watched her lover scale the mountain of glass?

When Hector's deep voice, thrilling with emotion, told her that he loved her, when the magnetism of his gaze forced her to lift her eyes to his, and she read there a depth of tenderness, a glow of passion such as she had never even imagined to herself, what wonder if her untried heart was stirred and insensibly began to respond to his ardour?

The most luxuriant growth is to be found in the

virgin forest, they say, the most bountiful crop springs from the newly tilled field, and this new, strange, sweet emotion gathered strength with every moment that Norah spent in Hector's company.

They did not heed that the sky gradually became overcast, or that the raging of the waves far below increased in fury. It was not until a violent clap of thunder reverberated round the enclosure that they realised the position of affairs, and they began to hasten down in search of shelter with all possible speed. The rain was falling heavily before they had accomplished the descent, and it was with streaming garments that they halted at last outside Mrs. McMorrough's house.

"Well, thank God you're safe back," cried she in answer to their apologies. "Sure, what does it matter at all about your comin' in wet as long as it's not destroyed you are? Run into the room, alanna, and change into the clothes ye had yesterday, an' I'll be able to find a suit o' my poor husband's—the Lord ha' mercy on him!—that you can be puttin' on, Mr. McTavish."

She looked from one to the other and nodded with a wistful smile.

Little streamlets were running from every one of Hector's ruddy locks, and his shirt was pasted to his form—he had taken off his coat to wrap round Norah—but his face was shining as though the stony height from which he had descended were another Mountain of God. In Norah's face, too, there was a glow which had not been there yesterday.

"Och, well," said Sheila, "it's little the two of yez care what sort of weather it is! But change your wet clothes quick and come to the fire. I'll be gettin' ye a bit to ate then."

Hector, taking the garments which she gave him, disappeared into the room once occupied by Sheila's

mother-in-law, and now used as a store-room for turf, while Norah vanished into the bedroom which she shared with her hostess.

When they reappeared, they found the table laid, and Sheila in the act of lifting out smoking potatoes from the pot which had been hanging over the fire. These having been set down to steam, she next took down from the dresser-shelf a slab of cold bacon, the remains of yesterday's repast, and proceeded to brew a pot of very strong tea.

"I'm sorry I've no milk for ye," she remarked; "but the goat's dry on me this couple of weeks."

They sat down with appetites sharpened by the long hours they had spent in the keen air, and again Sheila's face fell as she noticed that Hector did not join in the grace which she uttered aloud. It was perhaps purposely that she led the conversation into channels which turned upon religion.

"Aye," she remarked, as though speaking to herself, while she glanced towards the little window darkened by the storm. "I don't remember such weather as this for many a year. Ye'll be hard set to get across to Kilronan itself to-morrow. There's only the one thing will get a boat out when the sea's that wild, an' that's when a priest is wanted on a sick call."

She paused. Hector made no remark, but Norah looked up.

"Doesn't there be any priest livin' on this island, then, ma'am?"

"There does not; it's at Kilronan the two of them does be livin'. They come over on a Sunday, and to give Stations now and again, an' whenever anybody's sick they'll come, wet or dry, hail or storm."

"It 'ud be a brave man that 'ud go across to fetch anybody, priest or no, on such a day as this," said Hector, roused by something challenging in her tone.

"Aye, it 'ud be a brave man, but it is brave men that's livin' on this island. It's me that has good reason for sayin' that same. When my poor husband was at the last, it's beggin' an' prayin' he was for the priest, an' says he to me, 'Sheila, I know he'll come.' So I went out. It's very near wild I was, for by ill-luck the storm ragin' that day was the worst ever known on these islands. But I axed the neighbours would they for the love of God go over to Kilronan an' fetch him. Well, two of them went. They was watchin' for a length of time down by the shore, till they got a chance to launch the curragh, an' off with them then. Aye, I stood a moment an' seen the boat tossin' up an' down on the water, an' made sure that it 'ud be dashed to pieces before it had so much as got any distance from the shore. An' then I had to go back to my poor man to give him all the encouragement I could. An' it was dark it was. Well, to make a long story short, they got over safe, an' they found the young priest just draggin' himself home after travellin' very near the round of the big island—it was a sickness they had in Inishmore then, an' the people was dyin' like flies. The poor young priest had attended eighteen sick beds, no less, that same day, an' it was perished he was with the wet an' the cold, an' wore out fightin' with the storm, an' that tired out with walkin' he could hardly drag one foot after the other. Poor Thady McMorrough that went over to fetch him—he's a first cousin o' my poor husband's—many's the time he's told me since he'd hardly the heart to go axin' him to come back with him an' risk his life on such a night, for 'twas a terrible risk, mind ye. But he thought of Himself, an' the longin' that was on him, an' he took courage to ax him, an' for a moment he says the priest stood lookin' at him, an' he as white as a sheet an' tremblin'. Says Thady to me after, 'I could see it was the hard

struggle he had to make up his mind, but at last he says, "Well, I'll come," he says.' He staggered off to the chapel then for what he wanted, an' then down with him to the shore an' into the boat."

"An' he got across safe?" exclaimed Norah breathlessly.

"He did, thanks be to God! , I was sittin' inside by the bed, houldin' Brian's hand, an' I could be lookin' down through the windy at the shore, an' seein' the lights flashin' backwards and forwards, for very near everyone in the place was out watchin' for the priest—walkin' up an' down with torches they was. Well, it was near drowned they were, over an' over again, an' they comin' over. I believe the priest himself said he was never so near death. But at last I could hear the great shout they let out when the curragh was dragged on shore; aye, if I live to be a hundred I'll never forget the sound of it. It was louder than the waves an' the wind itself! An' then I seen the lights movin' up this way an' at last the door bursted open an' in he come. They was very near carryin' him by that time, but in he come, an' Brian says, 'I knew ye'd come,' he says. It wasn't half an hour after that that he died in the young priest's arms."

Her voice broke as she uttered the last words, and she threw her apron over her head. Norah impulsively ran round the table and flung her arms round her, but Hector sat silent, picturing the scene to himself.

The dark, wild night, the crowd of expectant figures braving the storm, the great cry which went up from them when the priest was safely drawn on shore, and then the swaying, faltering form struggling upwards, escorted, almost carried, by the crowd, and the dying man's rapture on being granted his heart's desire: "I knew ye'd come!"

The heroism of the tale, the poetry of it, appealed strongly to his Celtic imagination.

"That was grand," he said at length.

Sheila pulled down her apron after a time, wiped her eyes with a corner of it, and kissed her wedding-ring with a murmured ejaculation. This action reminded Hector of the idea that had come to him when Norah described the Claddagh ring to him, and had told him of its owner's desire to sell it.

He now expressed this desire to Sheila, and was surprised at the evident hesitation with which she received the request.

She rose in silence after looking at him for a moment or two, and went into the adjoining room, whence, after a short absence, she returned, holding out the ring in the hollow of her hand.

Hector took it up and examined it.

"I like thon pattern well," he said. "Two hands and one heart. I'd give you a good price for it, ma'am."

"I'll engage you would," said she; but she stretched out her hand for the ring nevertheless.

"I seen one in a shop in Belfast," he went on, "an' it was priced twenty-five shillin'. I'd be willin' to give ye that for it if ye thought it a fair price."

"It's a lot o' money," said Sheila.

Hector began to fumble in his pocket, but she stopped him.

"Ye see the way it is with me is, I do be callin' to mind that this ring was my mother's, and her mother's before her, and who knows how many before that. 'Twas put on the finger of each of them before the altar, and in the sight of the priest of God, and 'twas put on in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost—this way."

Turning to Norah, she slipped the ring over each of the fingers of her left hand, beginning with the little finger and ending with the index as she pronounced the word "Amen."

"That's the way the Claddagh wedding-ring does be worn, and that's the right way to put it on. Them that wore it was good women an' good Catholics. I wouldn't like to run the risk o' partin' with it if it wasn't to be used the same way."

A dead silence fell, and then Norah said in a frightened voice:

"But it's for myself he's wantin' it, Mrs. McMorrough, an' sure you know very well I'm a Catholic."

"Aye," said Sheila, and her eyes looked piercingly at Hector under her bent brows. "But what's himself? And what way is it he's thinkin' o' putting the ring on your finger? It's no likin' he has for the holy words I'm after sayin'."

"Now, you're wrong there, ma'am," cried Hector hotly. "We believe the same as yourselves that way, and them that does be married by our ministers is married in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost."

"Sure you wouldn't want to go take her into a Protestant church," said Sheila quickly. And Norah uttered a little cry.

The pallor of the sweet face, till now so radiant, went to Hector's heart. He turned impulsively to the girl.

"I would not," he cried eagerly. "I'd never ax you to do anythin' again' your conscience."

The disturbing influence of the storm, the intoxication of those hours spent yonder under the protecting walls of the old fort had already stirred Norah's young blood, and now, in her passion of gratitude for what she took to be Hector's ultimate concession, she turned to him impulsively and threw her arms round his neck.

"Och, Hector, you're good!" she said. And Hector, catching her to him, murmured brokenly:

"It 'ud be quare if I didn't do everything you wished."

And thereupon Sheila's last scruple vanished.

CHAPTER XXII

DURING the next few days the gale increased instead of diminishing, the weather being so tempestuous that even the steamer from the mainland failed to reach the islands, and was obliged to put back to Galway harbour.

It was not until the end of the week that Hector and Norah were at length enabled to accomplish their somewhat perilous transit, and to board the steamer at Kilronan.

There chanced to be an old man on board who had crossed over from the mainland to Aranmore on the day of the pig fair, and who now eyed them sternly as they passed, presently turning to murmur a few words in Irish to one of the sailors who stood beside him. This man, too, eyed them curiously, and after a little time came up to Hector.

"I'd like a word with yourself," he said briefly.

Hector, in surprise, followed him to a little distance.

"Wasn't it you and the girsha we sent ashore for Inishmaan at the beginning of the week?" he said.

Hector nodded.

"I thought so," resumed the other. "It was myself fetched the rope to tie round the girl's waist, and I'm thinkin' it 'ud have been better for her if she'd fell into the sea without it."

"What in the world do you mean?" ejaculated Hector.

"Och, ye know well enough what I mane," retorted

the man. "Do ye think I'd have lent a hand if I'd known it was takin' her away unknownst to her family you were, and the father dyin' an' the brother only just priested, an' you makin' out you were only takin' her to see him off."

"Sure, you know very well I wasn't able to get back from the island," said Hector flushing. "I went the round of the place that same day and couldn't get a boat for love or money."

The man surveyed him sharply and proceeded in a mollified tone.

"Ye had a right to have thought twice before persuadin' the girl to go that far, for everyone knows that with the storms that do be in it it's ten chances to one if you do get back the same day."

"I didn't know it then," said Hector. "The notion come to me sudden an' I lookin' at the water. 'Twas fine enough then, an' I made sure I'd be able to hire a curragh or a hooker to take her straight back home. But sorra one would stir for me; I'd no way of gettin' a letter over itself."

The other nodded in an unconvinced way.

"It's no good turn that ye done her then. Her name's in everyone's mouth. Ye's have the father kilt, anyway, an' the poor mother, that's the dacent woman they do be tellin' me, isn't anyways able to hold up her head."

"Let them be ashamed themselves that dares to be thinkin' bad o' what couldn't be helped!" ejaculated Hector with flashing eyes. "I'll be soon able to prove that I took good care o' the little girl. The minute I found I couldn't get a boat for love or money, I put herself in charge of a respectable woman that's living there. Mrs. McMorrough her name is. She'll be able to speak for her."

"Och, there's not many 'ull be carin' to be goin'

over to Inishmaan to be hearin' what she has to say," interrupted the other. "It's far enough off! What they do be knowin' here is that ye took the girl away without a word to anyone, an' that the s'arch was made for her all over the place. Faith, people 'ull be hard set to think well of the two of yez!"

Hector turned away indignantly and drew Norah to the farther end of the deck, where they could converse with less chance of being overheard.

"I'm after being told a thing that'll be apt to upset ye," he said. "I'm awful upset myself, but we must just do the best we can to put things right. Your mother come lookin' for ye the day after we left, an' was terribly put about when she heard it was to the island we'd gone. Thon fellow says that folks are gossipin'."

"Hector, what in the world do ye mean?" gasped Norah. "Sure, how could we help it? Why would my mother be angry?"

"What I mean is this, well," rejoined he. "There's ill-natured folks and hard-hearted folks about that's always ready to put a bad construction on what there's no harm in at all. You're knowin' as well as myself 'twas by accident we've been stoppin' away all this time, and that the reason I didn't tell your father and mother I was goin' to take ye a trip to Inishmaan was because the notion only occurred to me when we went down to the harbour. But there's them ready to believe that I done the whole thing on purpose, an' that I didn't mean right by you when I took you away. The only thing for us to do now is to get married as soon as we can."

Norah looked at him, hesitating and alarmed.

"We'll have to see what my Da says," she faltered, "and maybe Father O'Flaherty wouldn't be willin'. Och, I wisht it wasn't a Protestant you were!"

"Your Da and Father O'Flaherty will have to agree, then," rejoined Hector. "They'll know very well it's the only thing to be done now. It's for your sake I'm anxious for it to be settled at once, ashore," he added tenderly, "because the thought that anybody might give you as much as one cold look drives me mad."

He spoke the truth, and would probably not have been so urgent in pressing her to come to an immediate decision, had he not been thoroughly convinced that the announcement of a speedy marriage was the only means available for stopping the spread of scandalous reports. But, nevertheless, there lurked a deep satisfaction in the thought that the fact of their union being now practically inevitable rendered it impossible for any religious scruples, either on the part of her parents or herself, to come between them.

He laid his hand over Norah's cold one that trembled as it rested on the ship's side, and said gently:

"Sure, it's not sorrowful you are at the thought of bein' my wife, Norah? Have ye no trust in me, then?"

Norah looked up at him with eyes brimful of tears. She could not speak, but the look in them satisfied him.

In spite of his previous annoyance and the real sympathy which he felt for the girl's anxiety and distress, Hector's heart beat high with triumph. When they presently landed, he spoke to her in a voice unconsciously ringing with exultation.

"It's best for us to take a car and drive off as fast as we can to Cloon-na-hinch. The sooner we are able to set your mother's heart at rest the better. We'll get my bag out from the parcel office and then we'll start. I'll have to leave the bike till I've time to come fetch it."

Curious and resentful glances were directed towards them by the officials at the station and by one or two chance loiterers. The porter who handed his bag to Hector eyed him almost fiercely.

"There's been the devil's own hue an' cry after the two o' yez," he remarked. "The country's ringin' with the talk that's in it about yez."

"We were caught by the storm at Aran," returned Hector stiffly, "and we couldn't get back till to-day."

"What were yez doin' in Aran?" cried the other. "And the father and mother thinkin' it was only goin' to Galway you were to see the brother off. Ye have the poor ould man destroyed, so ye have."

"What's that?" Norah was beginning with white lips, when she was interrupted by a ragged bystander.

"Faith, it was a quare notion for the two of yez to run off that way. The parish priest of Cloon-na-hinch himself come here axing for yez."

"Father O'Flaherty!" ejaculated Norah.

"Aye, and your own mother," returned the porter, eyeing her sternly. "Three times she come here, and then she took off down to the quay—breakin' her heart she was."

"She'll know all about it soon, well," retorted Hector. "Hand over that bag if ye please. It 'ud be a good job for everyone in this world if more people that was in it minded their own business."

He picked up his bag, flung a few coppers on the counter, and hastened away with Norah. The girl was very white.

"Och, Hector, I am ashamed o' my life! To think o' Father O'Flaherty comin' all the way to Galway to ax for me!"

"We'll be able to tell him soon enough now, the way it all fell out," said Hector reassuringly, but he himself felt uncomfortable.

"And my poor mother, too!" Norah was continuing, when Hector paused and faced her.

"Now look at here, asthore, we must make the best of what we can't help. Ye know the way it was and

that it couldn't be any different. And what I'm feelin' myself is if it was to be done over again I'd do it, for it brought ye to me, Norah. Ye had no love for me, not the right sort o' love, till we went yonder to thon island. Aye, I bless thon island! Didn't I often tell ye I used to feel it drawin' me? I know now why it was drawin' me. It was because the crown o' my life was to come to me there. 'Twas there I l'arned ye to love me. Aye, Norah, if ye had the same love for me that I have for you it isn't frettin' ye'd be, but glad like myself that ye are to belong to me so soon, and that neither man nor mortal can come between us."

Norah lifted her eyes to his, and the colour returned to her face. The mere name of the island seemed to recall something of the spell to which she had succumbed on its rocky coast. Hector's face, exultant now, though a moment ago it had been reproachful, brought back the memory of those wild sweet moments when, amid the storm and stress of the elements, they had pledged their troth to each other.

"Even you yourself, Norah," went on Hector, noting her emotion, "I defy ye to look me in the face now and tell me ye'd like to undo what we've done—you to be the same as ye were before, ready to wait till your father made up the best match he could for ye, with some boy that ye scarcely knew the name of, and me to be wanderin' out into the world, never to set eyes on ye again most likely; for if it was married ye were to anybody but myself ye may be sure I'd never set foot next or nigh the place."

Norah gazed back into the fiercely bright eyes without speaking, but he saw her bosom heave under her shawl.

"Ye wouldn't like yourself and me to be parted now, would ye?" he asked tenderly.

"Sure, ye know I wouldn't," murmured she.

"Well then," he resumed joyously, "let the two of us put the best face we can on it. The talk'll soon be over, and your mother's the first that will be glad to know we're to be man and wife. I know well I'm as dear to her as if I was a son of her own already. It's herself 'ull be glad to know I'm to be her son in earnest."

Two or three cars were now taking up their position outside the station, where a train was shortly expected, and Hector, hailing one, assisted Norah to climb into her place, and got up next to her, the driver balancing them on the other side.

"To Cloon-na-hinch," said McTavish briefly. "We're goin' a little way beyond the town, but I'll tell ye where to stop."

The man leaned across towards them over the "well" of the car and grinned as he spoke.

"Faith, I know where I'll set yez down—at Burkes' beyond, isn't it?"

"And that's the place," said Hector, eyeing him sternly.

The driver shifted his gaze from the young man's face to that of his companion. He was grave now, and the girl looked down blushing.

"It's a quare thing for a dacent little girsha like yerself to be runnin' about the country with a stranger and him a Protestant," observed he after a pause, during which the horse had got under way and was proceeding at a swinging trot over the cobblestones. The car swayed from side to side in a manner which would have been disconcerting to anyone not accustomed to this mode of conveyance. "It's a wonder ye wouldn't be tellin' your good mother whatever it was ye had in your mind," he went on, "and your Da the way he is."

"I don't know what call you have to be talkin' to the girl at all," put in Hector hotly. "Thon man's no

friend or acquaintance o' yours, is he?" he asked, turning disdainfully to Norah.

"Musha," said the driver, before she could respond, "it's no matter whether I'm friend or acquaintance, an' I'm not that anxious to be makin' out I'm one or the other, I can tell ye. My thought's free, and so's my tongue, thank God. I've lave to talk o' what's in everyone's mouth."

"Don't be listenin' to him at all," said Hector in a low voice to Norah. "I'm thinkin' he's drink taken. Don't be upsettin' yourself now," he added almost sharply as he saw Norah's lip tremble.

The driver, straightening himself, volubly addressed himself to his horse, which had slackened its pace, and presently fell to whistling. No more was said on either side, but by and by one of Hector's large, strong hands closed over Norah's little cold one, and she was comforted.

CHAPTER XXIII

It was almost dusk when they reached Cloon-na-hinch, but as the car passed through the village figures rushed to the doorways. Norah could see their outlines against the firelit interiors, and it seemed to her that necks were craned and heads were nodded ominously.

"For God's sake drive quick!" exclaimed she impulsively. This running the gauntlet between folks so familiar, and in many cases so well beloved, was torture to her.

When they reached her home, the door was open, as it had been on the never-to-be-forgotten night of Hector's first arrival. But only a faint glow came from the hearth within, and it was not until the car actually halted at the gate that they descried a tall figure standing beside it. Norah sprang from the car and threw her arms round her mother with a burst of tears.

"Och, mother, we are back! Och, mother, I don't know what in the world ye must have thought of us, but it was no fault of ours. We never meant to stop away. But, mother, I'm goin' to get married to Hector, and it's the good son he says he'll be to ye——"

She broke off, her heart sinking as she realised that Honor was making no attempt to return her caresses, but stood like a stone. The very cheek against which she pressed her own was cold.

Honor put her from her at last, and said in a lifeless voice:

"Ye'd best come inside, the two of yez. I must be speakin' to yez both."

Hector, meanwhile, had lifted down his bag from the car and paid the driver, and the man, turning his horse quickly, drove off.

Honor led the way into the cottage and closed the door; then, stooping, she thrust a wisp of paper between the sods of turf and lit a candle.

The light fell upon a face bleached and lined. Twenty years might have elapsed since the day—such a short time ago—when she had knelt to receive her son's blessing. Norah looked almost fearfully round the room, and said, with the impulse to delay the impending inquiry:

"My Da's not here."

"Your Da's lying the same as he's lain since the day ye went away," said Honor in the muffled voice which Norah found it difficult to recognise. "I'll be tellin' ye about your Da in a while, but I want to know first the way it is with you and Hector." It was noticeable that though she pronounced the young man's name, she did not look towards him. "I want to know how it was that ye went off with him that way, without a word, the very day we were after seein' the last o' Father Pat." Here a wave of passionate emotion seemed to break over her, and her eyes glowed in their hollow settings, and her voice rose as she went on. "What sort of hearts have ye, the two of yez, that ye could do such a thing on such a day? I do be hard set to believe it's yourself that's in it, Norah."

Eagerly, if falteringly, did the girl explain the circumstances of their departure, Hector endorsing it every now and then by a rapid phrase or two.

Honor forbore to interrupt, and when she next spoke it was in a voice that, though still perturbed and anxious, was less angry.

"Ah, what's this tale ye have about you an' Hector goin' to get married? Ye'll have to see what the priest says about that."

"I think Norah and myself ought to get married as soon as we can," said Hector. "What we done, we done by accident; but accordin' to all I hear, nobody hereabouts 'ull believe that. It's best for us to get married immediate, and then everyone 'ull see I never meant to do anything but what was right by the girl."

"God help us!" ejaculated Honor, sinking suddenly on to the settle. "It's hard to know what 'ud be for the best. I can hardly bring my mind to think of ye that way. Och, if ye'd do the rale right thing, ye'd become a Catholic the same as the rest of us!"

"That's the one thing I can't do, then," rejoined Hector, and his face set itself in hard lines. "I'll not give up my own releegion for anything in this world; but I'll never interfere with Norah. That ought to satisfy ye."

Honor crouched on the settle, her elbows resting on her knees, her chin sunk in her hands, her eyes roving distractedly from one to the other.

"I'll have to be askin' Father O'Flaherty what's to be done about it," she said, at last in a dazed way. "But ye'll have to go out of this, Hector, till we hear what he says. Och, Norah, ye have my heart broke. But clear out of this, Hector; be off with ye this minute! I won't have ye in the house till I hear what his Reverence says."

"Sure, what can he say?" cried Hector, half in anger, half in distress. "Oughtn't he to be as anxious to avoid a scandal as we are? If ye turn me out this way it will only make matters worse."

As Honor shook her head he went on, with a sudden access of fury: "She shall be my wife, I don't care

what anyone says. Ye've no right to be treatin' me this way."

Honor rose and pointed to the inner room.

"Whisht!" she said. "Do ye want to be the death of Norah's father out and out before his time? It's dyin' he is now, thanks to you! Just a question of how long the little bit of stren'th he has will last him. The fright and the shame gave him the bad turn that'll be his end."

"Och, mother, don't be tellin' me that!" gasped Norah.

"I must be tellin' it to ye, Norah, for it's the truth," said Honor. "Aye, ye left me lonesome to bear the loss of Father Pat, an' 'twas lonesome I was when this other trouble about your Da come upon me; but it's all nothin' to the sorra an' the shame that yourself's after bringin' to this house!"

"Mrs. Burke—ma'am—for God's sake don't be sayin' them things to the girl," said Hector, turning as pale as he had before been red. "I'll give you my word of honour she wasn't to blame no more than myself, an' the two of us is only strivin' to do what's right now. I'll go out of the house this minute if ye bid me. I'm only anxious not to be doin' anythin' which might give rise to more talk. It's to the barn I'll go, well, if that'll satisfy ye."

He broke off, for Norah, sobbing convulsively, was clinging to her mother, and Honor, suddenly softened, caught her to her heart, kissing her with passionate grief and affection.

"It's too hard I was on ye, acushla machree," she murmured; "but it's near distracted I am."

"Tell me—about my Da," said Norah inarticulately.

"Och, sure, maybe he'd have took the bad turn whatever way it was," said Honor brokenly. "He kept tellin' me he was tired out, and I made him take

a rest on the bed. An' he felt partin' with Father Pat very much in his heart, so he did, though he didn't be lettin' on."

"Och, there's not a ha'porth of use tryin' to comfort me that way," wailed Norah. "Don't I know very well it was the truth you tould me at first? It's myself has been the death of him, my own good father! I'd sooner ye'd tell me straight out, when was it my Da took the bad turn? I'd sooner know."

"Well, he was very restless and anxious all day, God help him!" said Honor unwillingly, "and when it got to be near six o'clock he sent me down to Cloon-na-hinch to see could I get word of you or Mrs. Noonan. And while I was there young Pat Cumerford run down here on his bicycle—he was after overtakin' Mrs. Noonan on the road, and she bid him go as fast as he could and tell us ye'd never been near her all day, and she didn't know what had become of ye. Well, the young fella went and shouted out that message straight off, and the poor Da took a kind o' faint—or maybe it was a fit—I couldn't rightly tell which, but he hasn't been himself since."

Norah wrung her hands, tears pouring down her face, and Honor laid a soothing hand upon her shoulder.

"Whisht now, whisht, mavourneen, don't be fretting yourself that way! He's lyin' there as quiet as a lamb, and as peaceful. He doesn't seem to be missin' anybody now—and I question will he know Father Pat when he comes, the way I'm expectin'. I'm afeared he won't know ye when ye go see him—there's times he doesn't know myself."

"Didn't he know Father O'Flaherty, then?" asked the girl.

"Aye, I think he did—his Reverence himself made sure he did. He wasn't able to spake, ye know, to make his confession, but the priest took hold of his hand an'

axed him this an' that—what he thought he wanted to be axed—an' he says he felt a kind of little squeeze when it was *yes* he'd mane. He anointed him then an' give him the last blessin', but he couldn't give him Holy Communion, for he isn't able to swallow—I do be wettin' his lips with a drop o' milk. Aye, it was Father Pat gev him the Holy Communion for the last time, little as we thought it then. Go inside an' see him, asthore. He's just lying there, lookin' that peaceful ye'd think it was in Heaven he was already."

She broke off and her voice suddenly sharpened.

"Ye mustn't be frettin' or doin' anythin' to disturb him now—none of us know how much or how little he understands, an' though he doesn't be countin' time, or seem to be troubled about any of us, I wouldn't say but if you was to go sobbin' an' cryin' in there it mightn't upset him."

Norah stood for a moment quite still, pressing her hands tightly together until she had choked back her tears; then she went softly into the adjoining room, closing the door after her.

Honor sat down again upon the settle, her face falling into fixed lines of sorrow and endurance, and Hector, stirred to the depths of his being by compassion and remorse, knelt down beside her and put his arms about her.

"Mother," he said brokenly, "it's the real son I'll be to ye; anything in the whole world I can do to comfort ye I'll do. I promise ye that. I'll go to Father O'Flaherty myself this minute if ye like, an' tell him the way it is with us, an' hear what he has to say, an' when I come back it's to the barn I'll go, so make your mind easy. It's not troublin' ye I'll be, the greatest wish I have is to help ye."

"Ah, you're the good boy, God help ye," said Honor, but her voice had no life in it. She looked at him long

with sad eyes. "But it's the image o' your father ye are now ye've got that distressful face on ye, an' I'll go bail ye are like your father in more ways nor one. I'm afeared you're just as bigoted."

Hector drew back, his face unconsciously stiffening, and the likeness to his father in consequence becoming more apparent than before.

He answered after a moment's hesitation: "It's no matter to anyone but myself what my religion is—that's for my own conscience. I'll promise not to interfere with Norah's, I tell ye."

"Aye," said Honor, "an' if there's childer?"

Hector made no answer. In the impetuosity of his passion he had concerned himself chiefly with Norah herself. Events had succeeded each other so rapidly that he was entering into this union, as it were, blindly, without making any serious calculation as to the future. The thought now flashed across his mind that some compromise might be agreed upon with regard to a hypothetical family: the boys, for instance, might be brought up in his faith, and the girls in Norah's; but he deemed it more prudent not to discuss this point with Honor.

"I'll be goin' to Father O'Flaherty now," he said.

But just as he was turning to leave the house a sound broke upon their ears which both simultaneously recognised: the hoot of a motor-horn, followed by the unmistakable whirl of Father Pat's motor-bicycle.

"Father Pat's come, thanks be to God!" exclaimed the mother, clasping her hands. "He'll be with his father at the last—I bless the Lord for that. Aye, I could very near have a light heart this minute if it wasn't for all this trouble with you an' Norah. But maybe Father Pat 'ull be able to help us with that too."

Hector himself, however, felt extremely awkward as he stood awaiting Pat's entrance, and the first glance which the young priest cast on him, after a breathless

inquiry to his mother as to whether he were yet in time, did not tend to reassure him.

"Where's Norah?" he asked sternly.

"Inside with the Da," responded Honor quickly.

"They came back to-day?" resumed Father Pat, turning now to her.

She nodded.

"I had to stop down below at the smithy to get a nut screwed up," continued he, "and they were all talking about it there. The car-driver that brought them out was in it."

"He'll be tellin' ye all about it himself in a little while," said Honor, involuntarily adopting a protective attitude towards Hector, whose confusion she compassionated in spite of herself, and whom after all she dearly loved. "Go inside to your Da now; it's not long he'll have ye."

Pat's face changed; hastily unbuttoning the little knapsack he brought with him, he drew out a stole which he put round his neck, and then entered very softly, and Hector simultaneously slipped out into the night.

He walked very rapidly in the direction of the priest's house, avoiding the village as he had no mind to be stopped and questioned, or even to become a target for curious eyes. When he reached his goal he found he had missed Father O'Flaherty by a few minutes.

"His Reverence and Father Casey is just after step-pin' up to Burkes'," the housekeeper informed him.

"Father Casey!" ejaculated Hector; the name recalled some dim memory of the past.

"Aye, that's Mrs. Burke's brother; he's after gettin' word o' Pat Burke's bein' so bad an' the trouble that's in it. An' now there's them that says that Norah's back."

She broke off, peering at the tall figure which stood towering over her silently in the darkness.

"It's yourself, is it, Hector McTavish? It's time ye come lookin' for his Reverence, then—it's a pity ye didn't find your way here before! God help poor Mrs. Burke! It's herself that has the trouble of the world. Och, I wonder ye wouldn't be ashamed to be lookin' her in the face."

Hector turned impatiently away, in no mood for further discussion on what had now become a very painful subject.

He hastened back with all speed, but paused when he entered the kitchen. The candle was guttering in its socket, the fire nearly out, the place deserted. Father Pat's voice, clear but tremulous, sounded in the adjacent room.

"Go forth, O Christian soul!" it said.

CHAPTER XXIV

FATHER PAT had indeed only returned in time to speed the departing spirit of his father on its journey to eternity. It seemed as though poor Pat Burke, whose hold on life had slackened on the very day of his son's departure to his new sphere of action, had held on until the moment of his return in order to receive permission to depart from his beloved lips.

"I think he knew him," said Honor, when she came presently into the living-room and told Hector of what had happened. "Aye, I seen his face light up."

She was dry-eyed and quite collected, but from the inner room Hector could hear the sound of Norah sobbing. By and by the priests came out—the great giant Father Pat weeping like a child; Father Casey, whom Hector recognised at once in spite of his grey hair, and the parish priest, who looked so much upset and broken that Hector had difficulty in identifying him as the jovial old man who had been the centre of the breakfast party on the day of Father Pat's first Mass. He paused now opposite Hector.

"I think ye'd best come along with us up to my house," he said. "This is no place to be talking."

"I've just come from your house, sir," rejoined Hector, "but I'm willin' to go back now. I'm—it's rightly sorry I am for the trouble that's here."

Father Pat raised his head, drawing the back of his hand across his eyes.

"Ye had a right to have thought of the sorrow that was in the house already, with my father sick and

myself going away, without bringing more to us," he said.

"Wait now," said Father Casey, "wait now, Pat. We'll have to be hearin' what he has to say. Are you comin' back with us?"

"I am not," said Father Pat. "Father O'Flaherty and yourself will be settlin' whatever's right. I think I'd best stop here with my mother and do what I can for her. The neighbours will be coming in too."

The news of trouble travels fast, even in out-of-the-way places like Cloon-na-hinch, and, as Hector followed the priests along the road, he passed one or two cloaked figures hurrying towards the house of death, and before they had accomplished a quarter of a mile the first long-drawn note of the keening fell upon his ear. His brain was in a whirl, his heart as lead within him.

He was on his way to make arrangements for his wedding, but his ears were full of lamentation and reproach, and he could not so much as clasp his sorrowing bride to his heart.

Later on, when he stood before the two old priests, in the little stuffy parlour into which he had never hitherto penetrated, he felt like a prisoner at the bar.

He told once more the story which had so often fallen from his lips that day, speaking in a straightforward manner but with a gathering distress, haunted as he was by the memory of Honor's drawn face, and the misery and reproach in Father Pat's eyes. Say what he might, it was evident the two old men who sat in judgment upon him shared the belief of the others whom he so dearly loved, and regarded the whole episode as a betrayal of what ought to have been a sacred trust.

Father Casey interrupted his recital with an occasional question, but Father O'Flaherty sat crouching over the table, his gnarled hands ruffling up his white hair in total silence. When Hector repeated for the

tenth time, "I think the best thing for us to do is to get married at once," he raised his head.

"It's easy talking, young man, but I'm not so sure that it is the best thing. You've done wrong, very wrong, in compromising the girl this way, but, on the other hand, the Catholic Church discountenances mixed marriages."

"I have Norah's promise," returned Hector doggedly.

"Aye," said Father Casey, "but, you see, to a Catholic girl like my niece Norah, obedience to the Church comes before anything else. She wouldn't have given you her promise if she rightly understood."

"Ah," put in Father O'Flaherty with a groan, "I ought to have warned her, maybe, but I hadn't a notion of what was going on. They're all of the one faith here. I don't need to be troubling my head as a rule about mixed marriages, but no one can tell what may happen."

"Honor herself ought to have been more on the lookout," said Father Casey. "I don't know what came to my sister at all that she let these two be thrown together this way."

"Aye," said Father O'Flaherty, "when I got word that Pat was sick and went down to him, I asked where was Norah, and she told me then about this young man taking her in the trailer. I said to her it was not a thing she ought to have allowed with any young man, and the answer she made was, 'Sure it was always like a son of the house he was—the very same as Norah's brother.' 'Ah,' I said to her then, 'that was all very well when they were children; but he's not her brother, you see. He hasn't been near the place since he grew up. How do you know what sort of a young fellow he is, or whether he is to be trusted or no?'"

They both looked at Hector, and the young man was once more conscious of a sense of treachery. To satisfy his own whim, and wilfully shutting his eyes to

all possible consequences, he had indeed committed a breach of trust which had led to many complications. And yet he could not even now wish the thing undone; his chief anxiety was to break down the intangible barriers which were set up between him and Norah.

"I'm willin' to do whatever is right to satisfy Norah's conscience," he said. "I'm willin' to marry her in your own chapel as soon as it can be done."

"Aye," said Father Casey, nodding his head thoughtfully, "but there are other difficulties in the way."

"There's no excuse for a mixed marriage here," said Father O'Flaherty. "There were plenty of good Catholic lads for her to choose from as soon as her parents were ready for her to get married."

"But she loves me," cried Hector, and his blue eyes began to blaze; "and she won't marry any other man but me now."

"Under the circumstances," said Father Casey, addressing his brother priest, "considering the scandal, and the great distress and trouble that's come upon the family"—his voice broke, and when he presently continued, it was in an appealing tone—"I have no need to tell you, Father O'Flaherty, anything about the family and the way they always strove to do their duty—I think, maybe, you'd be justified in applying for a dispensation, particularly as this young fellow says he is willing to do what is right. You will have to give the required pledges," he added, turning to Hector. "You'll have to promise in writing that you will never interfere with the free exercise of your wife's religion, and that all the children you may have will be baptised and brought up in the Catholic faith!"

"All the children!" exclaimed Hector. "That doesn't seem fair!"

Father O'Flaherty threw out his hand.

"That's the law of the Church," he said, "and it cannot, under any circumstances, be broken."

As Hector squared his jaw and looked back at him fiercely, he continued: "Come, now, you knew all along that the girl was a Catholic, and must be bound by the rules of her own religion. I am quite willing to believe that you did not intend to place her in such a false position, and that you are honestly trying to put things right by marrying her. At the same time, there's a higher law which must not be broken. If you are not willing to comply with it the matter must stop where it is."

"How do you mean, stop where it is?" cried Hector.

"I mean you can go away out of this altogether, young man, and leave Norah at home with her mother."

"Go away!" exclaimed Hector. "What sort of a notion is that? Go off and leave her with everyone pointing at her! And myself to be thought a scoundrel and a coward!"

"Aye," said the parish priest, "she'd have to bear her punishment as well as she could, poor child! As for yourself—come, there's no use your looking at me that way. There's no way out of it besides the way I'm telling you; go anywhere you like, ask anyone you like, they'll tell you the same thing. Unless you conform to the rules which the Church has laid down, your marriage with Norah Burke, the only marriage we can recognise, cannot take place."

"We'll stick to each other, then, I tell you," Hector cried hotly. "Norah loves me, and where I go she'll go."

"I don't think so," said Father Casey quietly. "She may break her heart, poor girl, but she'll not give up her religion. She's been a bit thoughtless till now, but if she has to choose between yourself and her faith,

she'll choose her faith. Wait a bit, lad, wait a bit," he went on, as he saw Hector's face working. "I think, maybe, if I explain matters to you ye'll not be thinking it such a hard case. You are thinking it's a dreadful thing for anyone, man or woman, to be bound as we Catholics, priests and people, are bound. But look here now, aren't there other societies and bodies of people bound by laws that are just as strict, for merely human objects? Take a soldier, for instance—he has to go wherever he's ordered whether he likes it or not. If he were to travel off to see his family without leave he'd be called a deserter and be liable to severe punishment. What's right for another man isn't right for him; and I'm told that a Freemason must swear blind obedience to orders which may be unintelligible to himself. Well, the Catholic Church has rules which can't be broken without sin, and one of these rules is that all Catholics entering into the marriage contract must pledge themselves to fulfil the ends for which, in the eyes of the Church, marriage was instituted—the chief of these ends being that the children of the marriage should be brought up in the Catholic religion. All true Catholics must put their faith before everything in the world, before prosperity or happiness, or what you yourself think the most important of all—love—and I tell you Norah *will* put it first. She'll understand very well she's no right to deprive her unborn children of their inheritance, any more than she has the right to break the pledges which were made for her at her own baptism."

Hector was silent for a few moments; in truth he hardly listened to Father Casey's exposition; his soul was torn by the struggle between love and pride. At last he said hoarsely:

"Well, for Norah's sake, I'll agree."

If he expected to note elation, or even satisfaction,

at this concession he was disappointed; the two old men merely looked at each other and nodded.

"It's the best that can be done now, I think," said Father Casey, and then a brief and, to Hector, unintelligible conversation ensued between the two priests. He heard the bishop mentioned, and the word "dispensation" occurred two or three times, and there was even a reference made to some possible application to Rome.

Hector, though he listened darkly, was really pre-occupied with the thought of Norah crouching by her father's bed, Norah sobbing, breaking her heart—would she give a thought to him at all, he wondered? And for her sake he was making what was to him a tremendous sacrifice of principle.

Finally Father Casey turned to him and held out his hand.

"We'll settle it as soon as we can," he said.

Father O'Flaherty looked at him searchingly.

"I think you're a man of your word," he said, "and what you promise you'll stick to. Your father was a man of his word, I remember that—in his own way."

"You'd best not be bringin' up my father," said Hector. "He'd sooner see me dead nor doin' what I'm doin' now."

He was turning to leave the room when Father O'Flaherty called out:

"Where are you going to?"

"Back above to Burkes'—to the barn," rejoined Hector somewhat savagely. "I suppose there's no objection to that?"

"There's every objection," returned the parish priest. "After all the talk there's been you can't go back to that house till you and Norah are married."

Hector turned round fiercely. "You're wanting to bind me hand and foot!" he cried. "Why wouldn't I

go back to comfort the girl, and tell her what I've agreed to for her sake?"

"She'll not be thinking about you now, at all," put in Norah's uncle. "It's on her knees she'll be by her father's corpse." Seeing the young man's face change, he went on more gently: "But I'm going back to my sister's myself. She'll be looking out for me, poor soul, and I'll be telling them all what we've settled, and that you're doing the right thing."

"Tell Norah I'm doin' it for her sake," said Hector.

He paused a moment, the allusion to his father having aroused a fresh burst of resentment within him.

"You were sayin' just now," he went on, "that I was puttin' love first, but I don't know if all this hadn't come about and I'd known what I know now, I'd give in this way just for love's sake—it's because—I—I—everyone seems to be thinkin' I've wronged Norah—that I'm bringin' myself to do everything a man can do to make amends."

Father Casey clapped him on the shoulder.

"That's well said!" he cried, "and I respect ye the more for putting honour before love. Aye, you're making the only reparation ye can to the poor little girl. Maybe some day you'll be understanding us all better—maybe some day you'll understand that there's a thing that comes before the highest notions of human honour, there's such a thing as keeping faith with God."

"Sit down," said Father O'Flaherty to Hector, "sit down now, Mr. McTavish, and we'll have a bit of something to eat. You'd best stop here to-night as it's so late. My housekeeper will get a shakedown ready for you, and to-morrow you can be moving on to Galway or wherever you like, till you can be married. Don't be in a hurry, Father Casey," for the latter was now struggling into his greatcoat. "They'll be all upset at Mrs. Burke's. You'd best take your supper with us."

"No, thank you; no, thank you," rejoined Father Casey. "I have but a short time to be with my sister. I'd sooner go up above at once."

Hector made a poor pretence of a meal, though he found it difficult to evade Father O'Flaherty's hospitable endeavours to force him to eat and drink. His soul was in revolt, and each time that the housekeeper bustled in, fixing curious eyes upon him as she set a dish upon the table, he felt a fresh consciousness of wrath and humiliation. She, like everyone else in the place, would know and triumph over the fact of his enforced submission to the decrees of a Church in which he did not believe.

He seemed to hear his father's weak voice calling from the past: "Be true to your releegion, laddie!" and mingling with it the sound of Norah's weeping—Norah, who was weeping alone, without, as they said, a thought for him.

It was with infinite relief that he at last obtained permission to retire to the narrow room prepared for him, and throwing open the window leaned out over the sill.

The distant boom of waves fell upon his ears, recalling the blissful nights at Inishmaan where he had been lulled by the same music; overhead the same moon was shining, as it had shone intermittently on the wet rocks yonder through scudding drifts of cloud, but the sound of the keen was in his ears, and in his heart there was darkness, unrelieved by a single ray of light. Even the thought of Norah was wrapped about with a poignant anguish which robbed it of its sweetness. When he was at last free to clasp her to his heart would there not be recesses in her soul which he could never gauge, secret barriers which he could never cross?

CHAPTER XXV

RAIN was falling heavily on the day of poor Pat Burke's funeral, but this fact did not prevent the attendance of a large concourse of friends and neighbours. Besides the throng which followed on foot there was a row of vehicles of all kinds—jaunting cars, gigs, and tax-carts of weird shape and dilapidated condition, not to speak of the ubiquitous "ass-car," laden with shrouded figures, the red petticoat, which served as umbrella to men and women alike, contrasting with the hooded cloaks worn by the more important of the matrons.

"Indeed, it was Himself that was respected," said Honor, with a momentary gleam of satisfaction, as the procession prepared to set forth. But then her glance fell on Norah, and was clouded. All these people who had come to do honour to the father would hear of the daughter's disgrace. The fact of Norah's approaching marriage with Hector in no way comforted her. It would, as she knew, seem almost as great a lapse from righteousness in the eyes of these good Connemara people as the escapade which had led up to it. She could imagine for herself the comments that would be made:

"Isn't it well for him he was took before he lived to see his little girl going up to the altar with a black Presbyterian?" "Och, well, sure, it was the best she could do, the crature, after running off that way with the young fella." "Troth, it's the patched-up business, whichever way ye look at it, and it'll be apt not to turn out well."

Father Pat now laid his hand on his mother's shoulder, and she obediently climbed into the cart which was waiting to convey her and Norah and one or two other relatives to the churchyard, where Patrick was to be laid to rest. Her son and Father Casey preceded them, with Father O'Flaherty on the latter's outside car. Hector, not having been invited to ascend either of these vehicles, took up, with a certain dogged determination, a position immediately behind the cart which conveyed the family. Norah's glance had met his for a moment, and was then averted. She sat in a huddled heap beside her mother, her shawl drawn over her head. It was Honor who gazed fixedly at the young man as they set forth. Even at this crucial moment her natural anguish was almost lost in devouring anxiety for Norah. What sort of marriage would it be, she said to herself, repeating the formula which she had placed in imagination on the lips of those others—disapproved of, unblessed! Hector, stalking along, with his face rigidly set, its unusual pallor emphasising the likeness to the fanatical bigot, his father, seemed to her a wholly different person from the Hector she had cherished so well, who had been to her, even lately, as her own son, the child of her love. It seemed to her now that she was giving her daughter to a stranger.

Hector, on his part, was not slow to note the resentful glances which were cast in his direction, and forbore to address a single word to any of the neighbours whom he had formerly known, and whom, during his recent stay at the Burkes', he had met on friendly terms. While waiting for the funeral procession to start he heard one man remark to another, that "it was a quare thing" for him to show his face at Pat Burke's funeral when he knew it was himself sent the poor fellow to his end,

"Aye," the other rejoined, "if it's true that the corpse of a murdered man will begin to bleed when the man that kilt him stands by, I'd advise that one not to go near the coffin there."

Hector took no notice of the implied accusation which he realised fully he was intended to overhear: but his heart burned with anger within him. "Let them think what they like," he said to himself, "and say what they like. I'll no be heedin' them." Nevertheless, as has been said, his face betrayed his secret indignation.

As the days passed, and the news of the approaching marriage flew round the neighbourhood, the attitude of its inhabitants became even more marked; not a few of Honor's cronies dropped in to remonstrate with her, looking askance at Norah if she chanced to be in the way.

"It's a wonder ye wouldn't be afeared of bringin' down a judgment on yourself, and the girl too, lettin' her get married to the very man that druv her father to his death," remarked Mrs. Noonan one day. "Sure everyone in the place is cryin' shame on ye."

"Father O'Flaherty himself thinks it's the best thing to be done, then," cried Honor, roused at last from the stupor of grief which had held her since her husband's death.

"Och, that indeed?" rejoined her visitor. "Sure? What can he do, the holy man, when yourself was that set on it? But he's givin' himself all the trouble in the world, goin' round from one to the other, tellin' everyone that he's only making the best of a bad job. Sure, Mrs. Quigley told me herself that his Reverence said to her that on'y he wouldn't be puttin' such a disgrace on yourself, on top of all the trouble you're after havin', he'd speak to the people from the altar, the way they'd

know he was dead again' mixed marriages, and was only allowin' this one because it couldn't be helped."

"Mrs. Noonan, ye have me moithered," groaned Honor, getting up and pressing her hand to her head.

"It's on'y for your good I'm speakin' so plain," resumed Mrs. Noonan. "Sure, the fella 'ull never be able to live here—ye had a right to know that for yourself. Ne'er a one will speak to him, or do business with him—it's boycotted he will be, out and out."

"I wisht ye'd all mind your own business!" exclaimed Honor. "What call has anyone to turn again' him if I can forgive him? I'm not sayin' he done right takin' Norah off that way, but he had no thought of it turnin' out the way it done. He made sure he'd be able to bring her back the same day. It was just a bit of nonsense and foolishness, not a ha'p'orth else, and now he's doin' all he can to make up for it."

"Och, that indeed, ma'am," said Mrs. Noonan, rising in her turn, and hitching her cloak up on her shoulders. "I b'lieve he's goin' to pay off the debt on your farm, and there's some that would say that'd be a good thing; but I tell ye plain, Honor Burke, if anyone had told me ye'd be the woman to sell your daughter to a black Protestant that way, I'd never have believed it."

Honor was silent, and Mrs. Noonan, satisfied at having made an undoubted impression, went away. Her motive in speaking thus bluntly, however cruel it might appear, was well intentioned. No doubt some lingering irritation lurked in her mind at the memory of the discourtesy which the young couple had shown to herself on the fatal day of their escapade, but she did really feel it right to voice the general opinion, and to put plainly before Honor the consequences which must accrue from setting this at defiance. Hector was regarded in the neighbourhood not only as a traitor to the trust which had been reposed in him, but as the

destroyer of the girl's own father. Norah was unhesitatingly set down as wicked by the villagers, who sat in judgment on her, while Honor was supposed to be mad. As for Hector himself, he was looked on with execration, and had it not been for the regard which was still felt for the Burke family, and for the influence of Father O'Flaherty, he would, no doubt, have fallen a victim to popular vengeance.

Honor had dimly surmised something of the disapproval with which the approaching union was regarded, but Mrs. Noonan was the first to enlighten her as to the possibility of her being accused of encouraging it because of the pecuniary benefit to herself. The idea, presented to her for the first time, seemed to her unbearable: the shock of it roused her effectually from the torpor of misery in which she had been recently plunged. She was able to face the facts somewhat brutally presented to her by Mrs. Noonan, and to realise the extreme likelihood of that good woman's prophecy being verified regarding the boycotting of her future son-in-law.

When Norah came in presently, she found her mother sitting by the fire with her shawl over her head, keening to herself with the poignancy of anguish such as she had not shown since the day of Pat's death.

"Mother, what ails ye? Mother, what in the world ails ye?" she cried, jerking aside the shawl, and pressing her lips to her mother's wet cheek.

Honor brokenly told the fresh grounds of trouble which had just been presented to her. "I'm thinkin' maybe they're right," she added miserably; "but I'm sick and tired wonderin' over it. Whichever way ye turn it's the disgraced girl ye'll be, Norah."

The colour rushed over Norah's pale face, and her eyes flashed.

"There's no disgrace, mother!" she cried hotly.

"Whatever mistake we made yourself forgave us, and my Da—my dear Da, he forgave us. He knew me before he died—he did so, and when I said, 'Ye forgive me, Da, don't ye?' he squeezed my hand. He did, God rest his soul! he did. He was lookin' long into my face, and he seen I done no harm. 'I'm back, Da,' says I; 'it was only by accident we weren't back before; we couldn't get home from the island on account of the storm that was in it. But we're back now, an' Father O'Flaherty is goin' to marry Hector and myself, an' we're going to do everything we can for my mother.' And he squeezed my hand again—I'm sure he did! It was glad he was. That's the greatest comfort I have—if it wasn't for that I wouldn't be able to bear the trouble we have, and the way the neighbours does be carryin' on."

Honor nodded gently; she was covering her mouth with her shawl, but her eyes were still heavy with tears. Norah had told her many times before of her father's real or fancied acquiescence in her project, and she had not the heart to suggest that he had failed to hear, or possibly to understand, the full bearing of the girl's announcement. Pondering it over to herself she had sometimes thought that the coupling of the word "marriage" with Father O'Flaherty's name caused Pat to surmise—if indeed he were capable of surmising—that Hector's conversion to the Catholic faith was to be a necessary part of the proceedings; but for her own part she considered it extremely doubtful if the dying man had remembered anything that had taken place, or had done more at the last than identify and bless his daughter.

"Do ye mind how my Da gave his blessing to myself and we goin' off?" pursued Norah eagerly. "I think he must have had some notion in his mind then about the two o' us bein' likely to make our match."

"Maybe w," suggested Honor.

Little as she agreed with the girl, she could not rob her of the fancies which stilled some measure of her self-reproach.

The shadow of death and of impending separation darkened her own world, but in Norah's love still reigned supreme. The mother realised this without any tinge of indignation or annoyance, though the knowledge of it deepened her sadness.

"So long as there isn't disappointment in store for her," she said to herself. "So long as the lad there turns out all she's expectin' of him! But he has a good heart, so he has—aye, he has that whatever anyone may say, and if they can but get a fair start——"

The purpose which had been dimly forming in her own mind took more definite shape; she even began to find some faint ray of consolation in the project of the sacrifice which was to ensure her child's happiness.

When Hector came in that same afternoon his aspect was such as might have chilled her, so dark was his brow, so short his manner. But Honor instinctively guessed the reason of his vexation, and after the first greeting turned quietly to Norah.

"Ye might run out an' feed the chickens, child," she said; "an' give an eye to Billy—he's a terrible wan for michin from his work when he thinks there's nobody lookin' after him."

Norah paused in the act of drawing forward her little stool to Hector's side, gazed questioningly at her mother, and obeying the hint in the latter's eyes withdrew.

Leaning forward then, Honor laid her hand on the young man's arm:

"You're after hearin' something from some of the people about that has ye annoyed," she suggested.

"I am that," admitted Hector; "there's nothin' too

bad for me hereabouts if anyone was to believe them. Not a civil word can I get out of any of them, and just now the little boys run after me, and I comin' along, callin' out 'landgrabber'!"

"God bless us!" ejaculated Honor.

"Aye," resumed Hector, "I have known all along they do be holdin' me accountable for poor Mr. Burke's death, though God knows if I'd been his own son I couldn't have been more sorry for it. But it seems I can't do anything right—they've heard tell of me strivin' to help ye to pay off thon loan on your land, Mrs. Burke, and I suppose they've took the notion that I'm puttin' money into it because I'm wantin' the farm for myself."

"I wouldn't put it past them," said Honor. She drew a long breath and continued slowly, "I've been thinkin', Hector, that neither yourself or Norah 'ull be given the chance to make any kind of a start here. It's the one cry with all the neighbours—it's going to boycott ye out and out they are; it 'ud be no life for you here whatever way you turned."

"What is it ye have in your mind, ma'am?" asked Hector sharply. "I thought it was all settled between us. I was reckonin' to go up to Coleraine next week and draw out the bit o' money—not all," he added quickly; "it 'ud no be wise for anybody to take out the last penny he had laid by, for there'd be no tellin' what might happen that 'ud call for a bit o' money——"

"Listen to me now, Hector," interrupted Honor. "Ye'll not draw out any money at all. It's a good lad ye are, and ye'll have a blessing for the kind thought; but it's come to me all at once that yourself and Norah mustn't stop here after ye get married. It 'ud be best for ye to go away for a bit till all this upset has blown over. Maybe in time the people here 'ull see the rights o' it—maybe they'll understand that it's a quare way

of takin' my part, to be drivin' my daughter an' her husband away from me. But sure, that's what they're doin', God help them! They'd think it was takin' my part they were, and showin' proper respect for Pat's memory, as well as punishin' yourself for not bein' more careful with the little girl. But sure, in time, when they see me livin' all alone by myself, and workin' early and late to pay off the debt on the farm, maybe they'll think different, and be glad when I do be tellin' them one of these days that yourself an' Norah is coming back to live here."

"I don't rightly understand, ma'am, what ye're at," returned Hector. "Do ye mean for me an' Norah to be leavin' ye, and for me to go back to my old work and let you manage by yourself?"

"That's the very thing I do mean," rejoined Honor. "I want the two of yez to have a clear start—I want my little girl to be happy. Sure, she thinks the light shines out o' ye, Hector—it's wrapped up in ye she is, an' if she thought ye were abused and put upon through marryin' herself, she'd never hold up her head. Sure, all I want is for the two of yez to be happy," she repeated, fixing her dark eyes lovingly, almost beseechingly, on the young man's face.

His own eyes softened as he looked at her: he grasped her hand and wrung it warmly.

"You're the good woman," he said, "the best woman in the world! I'd never have thought of axin' ye to do that much; I'd never have tried to take Norah from ye."

"It's for her sake as well as your own," rejoined the mother. "I'll be thinkin' of the two of yez happy together, and that will hearten me an' me goin' about my work. I'll be glad to think I'm workin' for the two of yez, and for them that'll come after yez. It's the proud woman I'll be when I have the debt paid off.

But there's only one thing I'll ax ye," she went on, "don't be takin' Norah entirely among Protestants. She'd never make herself at home among them. She'd have to be within reach of a chapel and a priest, and maybe a few Catholic neighbours. It'll be strange for her, the creature, goin' away from the place where she's lived all her life; ye'll be mindin' that, and ye'll settle down somewhere that she'll be able to make friends."

Hector's brow which had momentarily darkened cleared again.

"That's fair enough," he said. "That's fair enough," he repeated after a pause. "If I go out of this," he went on, still ruminating, "I think it's to the North I'd go—aye, I'd have to go to Ulster, for I'm used to the ways and the people there, and I've worked among them all my life, an' I'd find it easier to get a place there, and the wages are good, forbye. But there's plenty of Catholics in Derry—there's no reason why I shouldn't get work there. They must have engineers to work those big factories. I'll tell ye what I'll do. I'll write to my last boss for a reference, and I'll go off to Derry on Monday and look out for a job."

"Is Derry far?" queried Honor faintly.

"Not so far as other places," rejoined he. "Not near so far as Coleraine or Belfast. Aye," he went on, "I'll start on Monday, and I'll be lookin' out at the same time for a little house that 'ull suit the two of us, and maybe get a few sticks of furniture—just whatever we want to begin with. Norah 'ull like to choose the rest for herself."

His eyes shone, his voice was jubilant. Honor nodded gently and paused till she could steady her voice; then she said:

"Well, that's settled. Will we call in Norah now?"

PART III

CHAPTER XXVI

THE wedding-day came, a day of chequered joy and sorrow, even of fear, for Norah could not forget the gloomy countenance with which Hector had appended his signature to the paper which pledged him, not only to give his wife full liberty in practising her religion, but to allow any possible children which might be born to them to be baptised and brought up in the Catholic faith. But joy predominated when they set off for Donegal, among the mountains of which they were to spend a week.

It proved to be a golden week, in spite of the sorrow and the heavy sense of shame and disgrace of the days which had preceded them, for Norah, young and vigorous and loving, with her young and ardent husband by her side, surrounded by the wild beauty of the mountains where they were spending this beginning of their honeymoon, forgot the unkindness of the folks at home—the hurried, unblessed, denuded ceremony of her nuptials, the momentary qualm which preceded them, even the parting with the lonely mother who had not found courage to watch their departure from the door. At odd moments, indeed, the memory of the solitary figure crouching by the hearth, which had not so much as turned its head when the young couple had stepped over the threshold, would rise up before her, causing her a sharp pang; but then Hector would bend over her with a tender word, or a lark would shoot up from beneath her feet, or the sweet smell of

the gorse would be wafted to her nostrils, and the new and unbelievable happiness of the present would encompass her again.

They reached Londonderry rather late on a Saturday evening, and Norah's wonder at the size of the place, at the strangeness of the old grey walls surmounted by the guns which once did such notable execution on James's investing army, at the ships in the dock, and the many churches crowning the surmounting heights, was soon lost in the eager interest with which she took possession of her new home.

Hector had been fortunate enough to obtain an engagement as head engineer in a large factory; his own smart and business-like appearance, and evident capacity, impressing his new employer as much as the excellent certificates which he was able to produce.

The house which he had taken was a small one in a back street, but conveniently situated near the scene of his future labours. It presented a somewhat dismal appearance, the wall-paper in every room being soiled, and such furniture as it contained being of a battered and dingy description; Hector had indeed taken it over as it stood, for a small sum, from the outgoing tenant.

"We'll soon be able to brighten things up a bit," he said cheerfully. "I'd think nothing of papering the place myself if the man that owns it won't, and you could easy cover thon couch and chairs with a bright-looking bit of chintz, or something."

"I could," rejoined Norah, gazing, nevertheless, at the horsehair-covered objects in question with admiring eyes. "Aye, but I think they look grand as they are. Father O'Flaherty has a sofy the same as this one, and it's a carpet there is on the floor," her voice assuming an awestruck tone.

"Aye, a dirty old thing enough. I'd sooner have a

nice bit of linoleum that ye could run over with a damp cloth. We'll be lookin' out for that along with the rest when we go to buy our furniture."

"And here's pictures," Norah went on, peering at two dim shapes on the wall.

"Time enough to look at them to-morrow," said Hector.

"Is it holy pictures they are?" persisted she.

"You wouldn't be thinkin' so," returned Hector with a little laugh.

"What are they, then?" asked she suspiciously, for something in his tone struck her disagreeably.

"Well, this one's 'King William of Orange,' and thon's 'The Battle of the Boyne.' But come on now to the kitchen and let's be thinkin' about supper."

Norah's education had been, as she herself had once told Hector, of a curtailed description, but sundry stray copies of Nationalist papers had found their way even to the wilds of Connemara, and in more than one of these there had been allusions to that page of Irish history wherein "William of Orange" and "The Battle of the Boyne" duly figured. Needless to say these allusions had been couched in terms which were not likely to rouse enthusiasm in the breasts of Irish Catholic readers.

Norah stood still, and even in the light of the flickering candle Hector could see her face change.

"I wouldn't be likin' to look at them things all day," she said.

"Well, we can be talkin' about them in the morning," returned Hector good-humouredly. "But if we go take them down, they'll leave two patches of clean paper that will make the rest of the walls look dirtier than ever."

They went into the kitchen then, and Norah was soon all bustle and excitement, cutting slices from a

flitch of bacon which Honor had insisted on giving them to help with the housekeeping, while Hector lit the fire.

"Fancy my mother sendin' us this grand hamper all the way from Cloon-na-hinch!" cried the girl joyously. "I'm sure it was a comfort to her gettin' it ready for us the minute we left, the way we'd find it waitin' for us when we got here. There's a grand roll of fresh butter, and a couple of fowls, and eggs enough to last a fortnight, an'—och, Hector!—she's after making us a griddle cake!"

She sat down on one of the battered Windsor chairs, her voice choked by a sob.

"It's not cryin' ye are?" asked Hector incredulously.

"Och, no," rejoined Norah hastily. "On'y the smell of the cake and the thought of my mother kneadin' it just upset me for a minute."

"It isn't wishful to upset ye she'd be," returned Hector gently. "There's a little pantry here, did ye see, Norah? Ye can be puttin' thon things on the shelves to-morrow."

"Aye, so I can," rejoined she. "It'll be a busy day to-morrow, Sunday an' all; but there'll likely be Masses early enough at all them churches."

"They're not all Catholic churches," observed her husband. "But there's sure to be Mass late as well as early at one of them. Why wouldn't ye go to a late one, and rest yourself in the mornin' after all the travellin' you've been doin'?"

"I'd like to be goin' to Holy Communion to-morrow," said Norah in a low voice. "The first Sunday after you an' me gettin' married, and the last Sunday in May."

"What about the last Sunday in May?" interrupted he.

"Och, well, we do be thinkin' a lot of the Blessed

Virgin in the month of May," explained Norah. "The 'Month of Mary' we do be callin' it." Hector did not answer, and she continued tentatively: "But if it's tired ye were yourself, Hector, if ye'd rather come with me to a later Mass——"

Hector, who had been kneeling before the hearth making up the fire, turned round.

"I'm not comin' with ye, whether or no," he said firmly. As she uttered an inarticulate exclamation he rose and came towards her. "It's best for me to begin the way I mean to go on," he said. "You're a Catholic, and I'll not interfere with you; but I'm a Protestant, and ye mustn't interfere with me. I'll not go to your church, but I'll leave ye free to go at any hour ye like."

"Ye come with me at Cloon-na-hinch," said Norah.

"Aye," said Hector, "I did; but I'm not comin' with ye in Derry. I made up my mind when I signed thon paper for Father O'Flaherty that I'd never set foot in a Catholic church after the day o' my weddin'. Aye, I swore it to myself, so I did."

"Don't say that," cried Norah wildly. "Och, Hector, Hector! If I was to die wouldn't ye come into the church with my coffin?"

"Die!" exclaimed Hector. "Die, my darling! How could ye have the heart to name such a word, an' yourself an' me on'y just married!"

"But wouldn't ye?" persisted she.

"If yourself was to die, I wouldn't be livin' after ye," cried he passionately. His arms were about her, his lips pressed to hers effectually prevented any further remonstrances. Norah, gazing into his eyes, felt vaguely comforted. When Hector loved her like that, how could he fail to yield to her in the end?

Nevertheless, between the exciting influence of her new surroundings and her anxiety to wake betimes, there was little sleep for Norah that night. The

chimes, ringing out from the clock tower near the quays every quarter of an hour, would have kept her awake in any case during the earlier portion of it. Long after Hector's deep breathing assured her that he had fallen asleep, she lay gazing at the square of the window which a faint gleam from a street lamp rendered dimly visible. She missed the sound of the sea, ever audible in her own home. The waters of Lough-foyle, though not far distant, could never compete, even when voicing a storm, with the roar of the Atlantic.

Other sounds were audible, nevertheless — sounds which tended to increase the uneasiness and alarm which somehow took possession of her during that first night in her new home—a dog howling dismally in the distance, the unsteady footsteps of belated revellers returning to their own homes, raucous voices raised in vituperation or argument.

Midnight had followed on the jangling chimes which Norah had learned to dread, and there was silence for a short time, broken at last by heavy, uncertain steps wandering down the very street in which the McTavishes' house was situated. A drunken voice shouted repeatedly a certain phrase which Norah at first failed to catch.

As its owner drew nearer, however, and the heavy steps sounded over the cobblestones immediately under her window, she caught the words "To Hell with the Pope!" and then followed inarticulate cursing.

Norah sat up with a gasp. The man staggered by, stumbled, cursed again, and went on—only a little way, however. Norah heard the opening of a door close at hand, and the obnoxious formular was once more hurled with drunken defiance into the night. Then the door closed, a woman's angry tones sounded for a moment, and then all was still.

"God bless us!" ejaculated Norah. "What sort of

a place is this we've come to at all? To think of that dreadful fella bein' a neighbour!"

She was roused at last from an uneasy doze by a ray of sunshine falling across her face. Even into that squalid street the sunshine penetrated on this gorgeous May morning. It danced on the little looking-glass hanging in the window, and was thence reflected on to the shabby ceiling, gilding even its grime. The ray which had awakened Norah fell across Hector, who lay sunk in so deep a sleep as to remain undisturbed by it, though it made his hair, and even his eyebrows and lashes, gleam like gold. Norah gazed at him with irrepressible pride.

"He's a fine-lookin' lad—God bless him!" she said to herself.

And he was all her own. He loved her as surely no man had ever yet loved a woman. Certainly no young man at Cloon-na-hinch had ever wooed a girl as Hector had wooed her. One of these days, in spite of all that he said, his eyes would be opened, and he would kneel beside her before the altar where she was hastening to kneel now. The Lord would hear her prayer, the Holy Mother would help her.

Hector had seemed very well inclined to turn Catholic before, so she thought at least. Why shouldn't he come round altogether, after a while?

There had been a shower just about dawn, and when Norah emerged presently the wet cobblestones were glittering in the morning light. Raising her eyes, she could see that the sky was blue and pearly, and that beyond the grim walls which towered at the end of the street there was fresh green. But the street itself was very silent, no one was about, the windows were shut, blinds and curtains drawn.

Norah walked to the end of the street and looked about her uncertainly. The towers of several churches

caught her eye. Which would be the Catholic one? She crossed under a frowning archway, and found herself in a broader street. A few people were astir here. A milkman with a couple of cans in each hand was approaching her. She stopped him when he came close, and asked him to direct her to the nearest Catholic church. The man's face, which had before worn a placid, if business-like expression, changed in a flash. Into his eyes there came a look such as she had never before beheld in a human face, but with which she was soon to become familiar. It was not exactly anger, or suspicion, or contempt, yet it partook oddly of all three, and to it was added something else, which she could scarcely define, but which was, in fact, hatred—the terrible force which ruled supreme amid both sections in the North, taking the form of creed-hatred on the one side, and of race-hatred on the other.

Norah did not wait for him to speak, but fled past him, turning blindly aside, and proceeding for some distance to the foot of one of the city walls. As she stumbled forward her eyes unconsciously scanned the bleak masonry, and took note of sundry words scrawled thereon here and there in chalk or paint.

"No Popery" was written on one block of granite, and a few steps farther on appeared the legend "Home Rule. No King."

She was presently overtaken by a family party of cheerful-looking people carrying prayer-books, and with renewed hope she followed them. And all at once her heart leaped as a bell began to chime—not the chimes of last night, but blithe bells ringing out a very familiar tune.

"Glory be to God!" ejaculated Norah in an ecstasy of joy and relief when she identified the hymn which the Catholic bells of Derry were so gaily hammering out. "It's 'Daily, daily.'"

Here in this strange place she felt suddenly at home. Would not the children at Cloon-na-hinch be singing that very hymn, the first that she herself had ever learnt, after Mass that same day? The sound of it brought her nearer Connemara and her mother, and even the Da, who was, she hoped, singing the praises of the Holy Mother from his heavenly place.

Climbing this steep street in the wake of her guides, and passing through the flowery garden which surrounds the Catholic cathedral, she entered the church comforted.

A grand church—Norah had never seen anything so grand, and packed with people, rows and rows of them succeeding each other presently at the altar rails.

There were plenty of Catholics in Derry certainly. Norah thanked God when she, too, knelt in her turn, and the familiar words "Corpus Domine nostri" fell upon her ears. "It's all the very same as at home," she said to herself.

Nevertheless, when she turned to leave the church, and heard the people greeting each other, and saw husbands and wives, mothers and children trooping out together, a sense of profound loneliness fell upon her once more. Here she was, a new-made wife, kneeling alone at the Communion table while her husband lay in bed. When they would sit together presently, she would be half afraid to tell him about the wonders of this grand and beautiful church which he had sworn never to enter.

She stood still for a moment at the top of the hill, looking down at the grey town beneath, and wondered with a sudden new anxiety how she would find her way through that labyrinth of streets to the narrow one which held her home. She had followed her guides vaguely, without taking note of the ways they traversed. After Cloon-na-hinch, Londonderry seemed to her

immense. It must be bigger even than Galway, she thought. She might easily lose her way, or at least be slow in finding it, and then Hector would be waiting for his breakfast and might be annoyed with her.

An elderly, good-natured-looking woman now emerged from the porch, making the sign of the cross with holy water as she did so.

Norah turned to her inquiringly.

"Would ye be so good as to tell me the way to Fountain Street, ma'am?" she said.

"Fountain Street?" echoed the other, and into her mild but keen eyes flashed a sudden, sharply suspicious glance which reminded Norah oddly of that which she had detected in the eyes of the milkman.

"Aye," said Norah. "I only come here last night, an' I'm at a loss to find my way back there."

"Well, I'm livin' down by the quays yon," returned the woman. "I'll be passing thon way; ye can come with me, if ye like."

She spoke shortly, and Norah walked by her side for a moment or two without venturing to carry on the conversation. But presently, looking about her at the blooming flower-beds, she remarked that it was a lovely place, and added enthusiastically that she had never seen anything so beautiful at the church, instancing particularly her admiration of the Blessed Virgin's statue.

"You're a right Catholic, then, are ye?" queried the other. "What are ye doin' at all in Fountain Street?"

"We've only just come to live there," rejoined Norah in alarm. "Myself an' my husband is on'y just after gettin' married."

"It's a quare thing for Catholics to be livin' thon," said her guide. "They're all the rare bitter Protestants in Fountain Street."

"I'm sure my husband didn't know that, or he wouldn't have took the house. He was anxious to get work in Derry on my account, because there's so many Catholics there."

"Isn't he a Catholic himself, then?" asked the woman disapprovingly.

"He's not," confessed Norah in a low voice.

There was silence for a moment, and then the elder woman said coldly: "It's a quare thing for a Catholic girl to be gettin' married to a Protestant these times, when they're up again' each other more than ever they were before."

"I didn't know that," said Norah. "Hector's the only Protestant I know, but I've often heard my mother say herself and his mother was great friends entirely."

"Is that so?" rejoined her companion in a milder tone. "Where is it you come from at all?"

"From Cloon-na-hinch, down in Connemara," answered Norah. "We were all Catholics there. It's a lovely place," she added with a little sigh.

They were descending a bleak street, in which the squalid line of houses was occasionally broken by huge factories, or intersected by muddy alleys, leading to groups of warehouses. The hot sun had already dried the pavement, and straws and dust were eddying in the brisk morning breeze. Evil odours greeted them now and then from the gutters, the recent heavy rain not having lasted long enough to cleanse them while it had disturbed the sluggish flow beneath the gratings. No wonder that Norah thought with longing of the grey and green country at home, the sweet air, the rocks glistening after the shower.

The voice of her guide broke in upon her thoughts.

"It's well for them that lives there, then. It's quare an' hard for a Catholic to be livin' here at all, and now

that there's talk of gettin' Home Rule they're more wicked again' us than ever."

Norah was not so unsophisticated but that she, too, had heard of Home Rule, and though at Cloon-na-hinch people were more interested in buying up their holdings and wondering about the potato crop or the fishing, she knew that Father Pat, for one, considered that it meant great and glorious times for Ireland.

"Why would they be turnin' wicked about that?" asked she in surprise.

"Och, because it'll be the Catholics' turn then. They have us ground down long enough, but they'd like us to be ground down for ever. Sure, there's some of them here that does be sayin' they'd rather fight us all nor be havin' Catholics over them. Look at that now."

She stopped short before a battered door on which the same legend was scrawled which Norah had noticed here and there on the great walls. "No Home Rule. To Hell with the Pope."

"Och, did ye ever see the like of that?" cried Norah indignantly. "I heard a man callin' out the same thing last night. You'd think they'd be afraid of bringing down a judgment on themselves. It's a wonder any decent Catholic 'ud leave such a thing up."

As she spoke she began to rub out the obnoxious words which had been scrawled in chalk. But her companion seized her hastily by the elbow. "Woman alive, what are ye doin'? Do ye want your head broke and the clothes tore off your back? Come out of that, I tell ye; come on this minute. Sure, the street is full of people! Ye'd have a crowd round ye."

Her round and usually rubicund face was quite pale. She hurried Norah along for several minutes without speaking, but stopped at the corner of Fountain Street.

"Now, take my advice, an' keep as quiet as ye can. It'll be hard set for ye to get on anyway in this place, though I suppose your husband 'ull stand up for ye; but it's best for ye to keep your mouth shut and to go about your own business without mindin' anybody. These is bad times, so they are. There may be good ones comin', though I do be hard set to believe in any promises from England. But whichever way it is, Derry's a bad place to be in now, an' like to be worse. Good-bye to ye now, an' God help ye!"

She turned away, leaving Norah to make her way home in a puzzled and anxious frame of mind.

CHAPTER XXVII

HECTOR was waiting in the kitchen when his wife entered, having lit the fire and laid the table.

"Am I not a great housekeeper?" he queried, pausing, teapot in hand, to laugh in her face.

Norah brightened up in response, and, taking off her hat, hastened to assist him.

"I made sure I'd be back before you were up," she said, "but I was a bit longer than I expected gettin' home. There was such a lot of people goin' to Holy Communion, Hector." The words came out shyly, but yet firmly; something undefined, unexpected had risen up within her. She would not let herself be ashamed to talk to her husband about her religion.

"Was there?" said Hector.

He turned up her face and kissed it, and Norah, mindful of what her mother had taught her of the special virtue of "the first kiss" after Holy Communion, and of the eagerness with which she had received such a token from Honor's lips in her childhood, returned his caress with a fervour which surprised and thrilled him. There was something sacramental in that kiss, though he was unaware of it.

"It'll do him good, unknown to himself," she thought.

"You're lookin' very grand this mornin'," she said presently, when they were seated at table.

"Oh, I made myself smart," Hector rejoined. "I'll be goin' to church myself by and by."

"To the Protestant church?" asked Norah. And a shade came over her face.

"To the Presbyterian meeting-house I'm goin'. It's a Presbyterian I am."

"Aye, I know," said she. She looked at him wistfully, and continued after a pause: "The Presbyterians wouldn't be as wicked again' the Catholics as the right Protestants, would they?"

"What is it ye mean?" asked Hector good-humouredly. "Presbyterians are right Protestants, though they're not church folks."

"But they wouldn't be wicked again' Catholics?" insisted Norah. "There was a woman come back with me to show me the way, and she told me it was terrible here in Derry, the way they was set again' the Catholics, and they wanted them to be ever an' always ground down."

"Och, that was only talk," returned Hector, still good-humouredly. "That's the way they do be carryin' on. The Catholics are right well off; they've nothing at all to complain of."

"I'm not sure of that, then," cried Norah, setting down her cup suddenly. "I seen with my own eyes dreadful bad things wrote on the walls again' Catholics; aye, I did. I seen 'To Hell with the Pope' wrote up." Her eyes flashed indignantly.

"Ye mustn't be noticin' them things," said Hector, helping himself to another slice of bacon. "The like of that's only foolishness. Some of the boys that has nothin' better to do——"

"But I heard a man callin' out the very same thing last night," interrupted Norah. "You was after fallin' asleep. It was drunk he was, I think; and he come draggerin' along the street, shoutin' it all the way."

"Well, ye mustn't be mindin' what a man says when he's drunk," said Hector soothingly. "You're not used to towns, and that's the truth, and I'll no deny that up here in the North the cry is always about releegeon

when it's excited they are. Releegion an' politics. The Protestants are again' the Pope, an' the Catholics are again' the King, that's where it is; but I'm surprised at them beginnin' this work so early in the year. In Belfast they used to be fairly quiet until July come. It was when the twelfth was comin' on that they used to get quare and lively."

"The woman told me it's the talk about Home Rule has them that wild," said Norah more placidly. "They have that wrote up on the walls too. 'No Home Rule.'"

"Well, they re right enough there," said Hector seriously. "It 'ud be an awful misfortune if this Home Rule Bill was to pass. It never will pass; it'll not be read a second time."

A pause ensued, and then Norah said with a puzzled expression, "I don't rightly understand what you're sayin', Hector."

"Of course ye don't," rejoined he gaily. "Don't ye be botherin' your head about politics, asthore. There's them that's ready and willin' to speak for us in the North, but as far as that goes, we are well able to take care of ourselves. I'll have another cup of tea now. It's a grand day, so it is. Yourself an' me will go for a walk in the country after dinner. It's a bit pale you're lookin'. Ye had a right to lie down on the bed an' rest yourself while I'm at meetin'."

"Och, I don't think I'll do that," returned she. "I've too much to do."

"Ye mustn't be workin' too hard on Sunday," remarked Hector. "Just straighten up a bit—what can't be helped—and then sit down with a book if ye won't lie down. I'll be back in good time for dinner. I'll go out an' have a look at the town till it's time to go to meetin'."

He went to the door, and then came back. "I was

forgettin' my books," he said. "Where's that box of mine that was sent on from Coleraine?"

"It's above in the room," rejoined Norah.

She followed him upstairs and stood by while he methodically uncorded the tin box, and hunted among its contents.

"Here they are," he cried, taking out a small parcel wrapped in newspaper. "No; that's my father's likeness."

He held out to her a framed black silhouette of a bearded man.

Norah looked at it dubiously. "Anybody would be hard set to know who it was meant for," she said, "when it's all black that way: but of course I disremember your father."

"It's quare an' like him, though," returned Hector. "Ye can see the high nose of him, an' the shape of his face—a real Scotch face my mother used to say it was. And that's the way he used to stand when he was thinkin' to himself. I value that likeness, for it's the only one I have of him. I'll knock a nail into the wall to-morrow an' hang it up next my side of the bed."

"I'll polish up the frame for ye nice," said Norah, as she carefully laid aside the treasured relic.

Hector discovered his books and went out, returning at dinner-time to find a trim house and a smiling wife awaiting him.

"I'm as hungry as a hunter," announced he. "What is there for dinner, lassie?"

"I've boiled a fowl an' a nice bit o' bacon," returned Norah proudly, "an' I've roasted the potatoes. They'll be lovely with mother's fresh butter."

"That's quite a feast," rejoined Hector gaily. "It's well we had the fowl, as there wasn't time to go to the butcher's last night. We must find one to-morrow. I

like a bit of butcher's meat to my dinner every day, an' a nice bit of roast beef on Sunday."

Norah threw him a scared look.

"I must try an' learn to be a good cook," she said. "We very seldom had roast meat at home. When we did get a bit o' meat we mostly boiled it. But I will soon learn. My mother used to say I was very quick at picking up things. I've made ye a custard pudding," she added proudly.

"That's great," returned he; "and you've managed to make this place look a lot nicer too. I'll just hang up my hat, an' then we'll begin."

He went out into the passage, glancing carelessly into the parlour, the door of which stood open.

"Hallo!" he cried in a changed voice, "you've taken down yon pictures after all."

"Aye," said Norah. "They are ugly old things, an' the paper behind them is just as dirty as the rest."

Hector re-entered the kitchen with a clouded brow. "I thought I said we'd talk about it," he observed after a moment's silence; "an' I told ye not to be work-in' at anything extra on account of it's bein' Sunday."

"'Twasn't such very hard work, just lifting them two pictures off the nails," returned Norah a little piteously. "When I looked behind an' seen all the paper the same as the rest, I didn't think ye'd mind."

Hector drew his chair to the table and sat down.

"Ye see, my dear, you an' me have different ways of lookin' at things, an' we must just respect each other's ways. King William was a great man, to my mind, an' the Victory of the Boyne was a great one—one that every Ulsterman should be proud of. I tell ye when I went round the old walls here to-day an' seen thon guns, an' called to mind how the folks here held out for over a hundred days, though they was forced to eat rats an' mice an' all sorts, an' the enemy

was pourin' down cannon balls into the place day an' night, an' still they *wouldn't* give in, I tell ye I felt glad to be an Ulsterman."

"God bless us! go through all that, did they?" asked Norah, who was unacquainted with the history of the siege of Derry.

"Aye, they did so," rejoined her husband. "I went round the place with a man I met by accident—he worked along with me for a while yon at Belfast—an' the two of us went round the walls together. He'd been readin' all about the siege, and naturally they be's all proud of it here, so we were talking about it. Of course I knew about it myself, but it wasn't as fresh in my mind as in his."

So, while he carved the Cloon-na-hinch fowl, and helped himself to roast potatoes and butter, Hector discoursed learnedly and enthusiastically of the world-famed siege of Derry, and Norah listened, only half comprehending and a good deal dejected. Hector made no attempt to disguise his opinion of King James's tactics, and, hazy as his listener was, she divined that the "enemy" of whom her husband spoke in such scathing tones, were Catholics to a man.

Hector was just describing the breaking of the boom when Norah rose to put the pudding on the table, and he consumed a large plateful while rejoicing over the fact that the *Mountjoy* had arrived "in the very nick of time."

"Aye, I'm glad we come to live in this town, if only for the memory of the siege," he summed up. "That's the sort of men we are in the North. We don't say much, but we act. That's the sort of man my father was—did ye know he was descended on the mother's side from the old Scotch Covenanters that was martyred for their releeigion? He'd have stood to the guns here till he dropped, so he would. Aye, he

was a martyr too, in a way. He went to his death in Belfast because he thought it right. He wasn't able to profess his own releegion at Cloon-na-hinch, an' he thought I wasn't brought up the way I ought to be brought up."

"Och, Hector, don't be talkin' that way!" cried Norah. She jumped up and ran round the table to him, throwing her arms about his neck. "'Twas my mother brought you up mostly."

"I'm not forgettin' that," said Hector gravely.

"Aye, but when ye do be looking at me that way I have a feel ye do be thinkin' ye didn't do right, maybe, to marry me. I seen your face change when ye talked about your father. You were thinkin' he wouldn't have liked ye to have me."

"You're a little witch," rejoined Hector. "'Twas the very thing I was thinkin'!"

He looked tenderly, nevertheless, into her wistful eyes and kissed her. His face relaxed. He was smiling when he spoke again.

"We oughtn't to have got married by rights; but here we are, man an' wife! An' I, for one, thank God for it."

"Och, Hector," murmured Norah, and her relief was so great that it found vent in tears. "I was thinkin' it was wishin' me away ye were. I was thinkin'——"

"You were thinkin' foolishness," he interrupted. "There's on'y one Norah in the world, let her be what she likes, an' believe what she likes. She's mine, an' I'm hers, an' the two of us will love each other always."

"An' ye did like my custard pudding?" said Norah in a small voice. "It's the first ever I made. Ye had me disappointed that ye didn't seem to notice it—an' me takin' such pains watchin' it."

"Faith, it's the bad-mannered fellow I am!" ejacu-

lated Hector penitently. "What was I thinkin' about at all? Thon's the best pudding I ever ate. Give us another plateful."

Norah gleefully went back to her place, and the repast ended in complete harmony.

Hector was a little taken aback, however, on going upstairs presently, to find that Norah had arranged a little table by the bedside, with a white cloth, a coloured statue of the Blessed Virgin, a pair of tiny glass candlesticks, and two small vases at present empty. "What's this?" he asked, almost sharply.

"It's my little altar," she rejoined, colouring. "That's the statue Father O'Flaherty gev me when I made my first Communion, an' my Da give me the vases an' candlesticks."

"Norah, do ye mean to tell me ye pray to that image?" asked her husband. "It's true, then, that Catholics worship idols."

"Och, no, Hector, what is it you're talkin' about? I do be prayin' to God an' the Holy Mother, an' tellin' the Holy Mother to ax God for what I want."

"But couldn't ye be sayin' your prayers without havin' an image stuck up in front of ye? If I wanted to ask yourself something would I be talkin' to your likeness?"

"Och, Hector, what's the sense of your going on that way?" returned Norah, exasperated. "Don't ye like havin' your father's likeness, as black an' ugly-lookin' as it is, to put ye in mind of him? When I do be lookin' at the statue of the Blessed Virgin it keeps my thoughts from strayin' when I'm sayin' my prayers, and sometimes when I'm goin' about my work it puts me in mind of herself lookin' down at me from heaven, and of her Blessed Son, Our Lord"—she bent her knee as she spoke—"an' more times it puts me in mind of my first Communion, an' all the good resolu-

tions I made on that day—an' that's a good thing, ye see—for then I do be sayin' to myself, 'I must be keepin' them.' So, you see, just looking at that statue helps me to be good."

Hector nodded, but was apparently unconvinced.

"I don't see why——" he was beginning, when she interrupted him hotly.

"Now, look at here, Hector, weren't ye unwillin' for me to take down them ugly old pictures below because ye said the sight of them, an' the thought o' William of Orange, an' the battle he won made ye feel proud of bein' an Ulsterman? It was seein' them pictures made ye feel that."

Hector's face relaxed; he threw out his hand laughingly:

"Ye have me beat!" he exclaimed. "Well, see here, Norah, we'll make a bargain, the two of us—I'll never say another word again' your statue if ye'll agree to let me hang up thon pictures again."

"Och, you're the rale perseverin' man," rejoined his wife, half laughing, half annoyed. "If it's any comfort to ye, you're welcome to stick up that heejus old fella again—it's the quare patron saint ye have! But hang him up, an' the battle too—I'll be mostly in the kitchen, thank God."

They laughed together, though both were secretly a little vexed and scandalised. Norah turned to the glass and put on her hat, and Hector went downstairs; she presently heard him moving about in the parlour beneath.

"It's hangin' them up now, he is," she said to herself, "Sunday an' all!"

Her sense of irritation increased when Hector presently piloted her along the top of the city walls; at every few paces they encountered trophies which seemed to flaunt the victory of Protestantism in her

face. The long, sinister, antiquated guns which had been presented by this or that civic body for the defence of the town, memorial tablets recording sundry events connected with the overthrow of the investing army; other monuments expressing pious thankfulness for deliverance from the same; the great pillar surmounted by the statue of Governor Walker which dominates the city, and which bears an inscription at once grateful and triumphant, setting forth the claims of the worthy gentleman and his companions to have secured freedom and religious liberty for the inhabitants of Londonderry.

Hector read this aloud with a kindling face, but Norah pretended not to hear him; leaning through one of the embrasures in the wall, she looked down at a squalid street where some children were playing—white-faced children in ragged clothes, dirty beyond power of description.

Once more she thought of the grey rocks at home; there would be children there, too, children in red petticoats and bawneens—they might have dirty faces, to be sure, as the result of their games amid the pebbles and seaweed, but it would be dirt of a different kind, not the ingrained grime of those city little ones. Honor would be standing in her doorway, perhaps, looking out towards the islands; they would be showing plainly on this day.

Hector touched her on the shoulder.

"What are ye thinkin' about, asthore?" he asked gently, for he saw that she looked sad.

"I was just thinkin' about the islands," answered she.

He put his arm through hers.

"Aye, the islands 'ull be lookin' fine the day; it's too fine a day it is to be wasted in the city. I tell ye what, we'll go out for a rale country walk, the two of us. We'll walk up this hill again, an' down thon steps that

we saw, an' we'll make our way right out into the country."

She agreed delightedly, and they set off, finding themselves very soon in a country road, with green trees about them, and gorse-grown banks, and a house here and there embowered in orchard trees. The blue and purple mountains of Donegal faced them in the distance, and they recalled incidents of their sojourn there as though they were staid old married folks discussing their far-away honeymoon.

By and by the sound of a river caught their ears, and turning aside from the main road they followed a winding track which brought them to it. A clear brown vivacious river it was, leaping over rocks, churning itself into foam over pebbly shoals. There were marsh-mallows and cuckoo flowers growing amid the lush green grass, and sedges at the edge, and on the opposite bank was an exquisite wood of larch and young beeches, with here and there a group of hawthorns just coming into flower.

Throwing themselves down on the grassy edge they rested for a long time, bathing their feet, which were hot and tired after their long walk, and listening to the thrushes which were singing lustily in the woods over the way. The noise of the river mingled pleasantly with the bird music; the young couple grew more and more silent, being indeed too dreamily happy to talk, and at last Norah, whose rest had been broken on the previous night, fell asleep.

She woke with a start and a little shiver, to find her head pillowed on her husband's arm, and his eyes fixed on her face.

She gazed up at him at first with slumber still in her eyes, and then smiled.

"You're the darlin' of the world," said Hector.

She sat up, laughing, wide awake now. The trees

opposite were wrapped in a golden mist; long shafts of light came from between the branches, but the river and all their resting-place was in shade.

"It's gettin' late," remarked Hector. "I wouldn't have had the heart to wake ye, on'y I thought ye'd be gettin' cold."

"Ye'll be wantin' your tea," cried she apologetically. "We'll make haste home now."

"There's no hurry," returned he.

She rose, shaking out her dress, and they climbed up the path again. A rabbit or two scuttled out of their way, and a pigeon cooed somewhere in the neighbourhood; the orchard trees were rosy now in the evening light.

After a happy, loitering walk they found themselves once more looking down on the city of Londonderry, lying wrapped about, it would seem, in Sabbath peace. Smoke was curling lazily up from many chimneys. The placid waters of the lough gleamed behind the grey roofs; the chimes in the clock tower rang out faintly, six strokes following the meaningless tune. They were drowned all at once by the swift gay notes of St. Eugene's bells:

"Daily, daily, sing to Mary,
Sing, my soul, her praises due."

Norah stopped short, withdrew her arm from Hector's, and made the sign of the cross. Her lips moved rapidly.

"What are ye doin'?" asked her husband curiously.

She waited a moment, making the sign of the cross once more before answering. "It's a little prayer we do be sayin' this time o' year instead of the Angelus."

"Och, that indeed?" said Hector. After a moment's struggle with himself he continued: "Well, you're free to say what prayers ye like—we agreed to that."

Then he added, in a softer tone, "It's like an angel ye do be lookin' when you're prayin', Norah."

She clasped her hands together on his arm.

"Och, Hector, avick, I wisht I was an angel—I wisht I was a saint—for your sake." In her heart she added, "The way ye'd know that the Catholic Church is the true one."

Hector, however, imagined that she spoke from exaggerated humility, desiring to become a perfect wife, and returned heartily, "You're good enough for me, asthore."

Then, as the bells chimed on, and a thousand flecks of gold appeared on the dancing wavelets yonder, and even stray wisps of smoke were caught and transfigured in the glowing haze, until they looked as though they were some hoverin angels' raiment, he, too, was uplifted by the magic hour.

"I'm thankin' God in my heart this minute for givin' ye to me," he said.

CHAPTER XXVIII

DURING the next few weeks life proceeded smoothly and happily enough. The little ups and downs incidental to the starting of a young couple in their new home were, perhaps, owing to the opposite upbringing and temperament of these two, more sharply defined than in ordinary cases.

Norah, for instance, felt surprised and hurt at Hector's annoyance when he discovered her, on returning from work one morning somewhat earlier than she had expected, standing in the street, barefooted, and clad in a red flannel petticoat and a bawneen, cleaning the outside of the lower windows.

"Sure, why would I go dirtying my good dress doin' such work as that?" she inquired. "And it's aisy enough to wash my feet when I'm done, an' put on my shoes an' stockin's then, an' not be riskin' gettin' my new boots destroyed on me."

"I'll buy you another pair of boots and a dress too," responded Hector, "but ye can't be goin' on in a town the same as ye done over yon, where there was nobody to look at ye but the crows. I'm a man of poseetion, so I am, an' it 'ud be a great want of respect to my employers to have the wife of their head engineer makin' little of herself that way. It's makin' little of me, too, that ye should be dressin' up like a figure of fun for the whole street to gawk at."

Norah ran indoors without waiting to hear any more; she ate no dinner that day, and was very distant

with Hector while she set his before him. But it was not in her to bear malice for long, and a grand reconciliation took place presently.

Hector himself cleaned the windows before going back to work, and took her out shopping that evening.

Perhaps if Norah had not been brought up in a place where there were only crows to look at her, she would not have been so overcome with rapture and gratitude at the extent of Hector's purchases.

As a matter of fact, these were not by any means of an extravagant nature, for he was naturally sensible and thrifty; but they comprised the "makings" of print dresses and aprons for Norah, besides linoleum for the parlour, pots and pans for the kitchen, and sundry rolls of wall-paper, with which he himself intended to decorate the walls. They also bought such articles of household napery as could not be dispensed with.

"When you have them all hemmed an' your clothes made, we'll buy some muslin for curtains, an' a bit o' bright stuff to cover the parlour furniture," he remarked. "But we've spent enough to-day for one while."

"Indeed we have," rejoined Norah. "I could kiss them pots an' pans this minute. I'll keep them always like a new pin. I've never seen the like—they'd be fit for the Queen."

Hector laughed and pinched her cheek.

"You're not used to thon things?" he asked condescendingly. "'Tis the big black pots your mother does be usin' mostly, isn't it?"

"Aye," agreed Norah, "but we have a couple of iron pans and the griddle, of course. We couldn't keep them bright the same as these things, no matter how we scoured them. I'll be glad to have a bit of sewin' to do, too, while you're at your work," she continued; "it'll be company for me."

"You'll have company enough by an' by," he rejoined gaily; "you'll be makin' friends with the neighbours."

Norah thought this contingency unlikely, remembering what she had heard about Fountain Street being chiefly inhabited by "Orange" people, but she forbore to speak her thoughts aloud.

Her husband, looking down at her, observed a faint shadow on her face, and said compassionately: "Of course, they're all strangers to you here, an' they're shorter-like in their manner, than the Galway people, but you'll get to like them after a while. There's no humbug about them. What they say they mean, and what they do they put their heart into. Ye should see how the folks work in thon factory! I had to go through it to-day to see one of the cutting machines that had got out of gear, an' I declare I was amused. Hundreds of girls an' women in every room, each doin' their own job, mind ye, an' each one workin' at it for dear life. Little bits of girls looking not more than children—to see their little hands flyin'—they don't waste a second o' time, no more than the women that's been at it for years. Ye see, they're paid by the piece, an' they know the value o' money."

"I'd like to see them at it," cried Norah. "I do be wonderin' sometimes what sort of a place it is you are workin' in."

"Oh, I'm down in the engine-room mostly. But I dare say I could get leave for ye to go over the factory one of these days. I'll ask the manager when I get to know him a bit better. He might think it a liberty now."

Norah was so busy during the weeks that ensued that she would have scarcely had time to go over the factory, even had Hector ventured to ask the requisite permission. She made her frocks and aprons, hemmed

dusters and tablecloths, and cleaned the house thoroughly from top to bottom. Hector papered the walls and knocked up a few shelves for her in his spare time, and they did a little painting, and even a little white-washing, between them. If they were able to run out for a breath of air before going to bed they considered themselves lucky.

It was just as well for Norah that she was so much occupied, as otherwise she might have felt lonely while Hector was at his work.

The neighbours eyed her askance, and she, on her side, was not disposed to make friends with them. Occasionally she caught fragments of conversation when two women scrubbed their respective door-steps, or when a group of the inhabitants of Fountain Street chanced to collect within earshot of her open window, and these remarks were seldom pleasing to her. The words "popes" and "papists," garnished with sundry uncomplimentary adjectives, were of frequent occurrence; she would hear, even between women, the announcement that they would never submit to "Rome rule" or be under the rule of "Catholic traitors."

Once as she was locking up her house, previous to sallying forth to do her marketing, she was accosted by her next-door neighbour.

"I'm wonderin' if you could oblige me with the loan of a frying-pan, Mrs. McTavish; thon one of ours has leaky got, an' my husband wants his dinner early the day."

"To be sure," rejoined Norah, brightening up. "You're welcome to ours, ma'am; I'll not be usin' it this mornin' at all. Come in, won't ye, and sit down while I go fetch it?"

"Thank ye," rejoined the other, adding as she eyed Norah, "you're not from these parts, well. I'd know it by your talk."

"Och, I suppose it's the great brogue I have," rejoined Norah with a laugh. "I'm from Connemara."

"Is that so?" responded the other condescendingly. "It's quare an' wild in Connemara, I've been told. I didn't think there were any Protestants in it. Ye have your place very nice got, Mrs. McTavish," she exclaimed, starting off at a tangent, as she looked round the parlour, into which Norah had ceremoniously ushered her. "It's a great improvement on the way the McLeans left it—they was a dirty lot. Aye, ye have the 'Battle of the Boyne' there, I see, and 'King William,' God bless him!"

"The McLeans left them two pictures behind," said Norah stiffly. "It was my husband hung them up."

She broke off, divided between her allegiance to Hector, the shrinking from admitting to this stranger that they could be at variance on any point, and loyalty to her religion. It could not surely be right to sail under false colours where her faith was concerned. This consideration gained the day. As she turned to leave the room she said, a little hurriedly, it must be owned:

"It's a Catholic I am myself."

She vanished through the door as she spoke, and getting down her bright new pan from the kitchen shelf, was in the act of giving it an additional polish when hasty steps in the hall, and the slamming of the house door, warned her of her visitor's departure.

Pan in hand, Norah followed her, and observed her standing a few doors farther down the street, in converse with another matron, who was nodding her head emphatically as she listened to what seemed to be a voluble speech.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon for bein' so long gettin' the pan," Norah was beginning, when she broke off, startled by the inimical expression on the faces of both women.

“I’ll not be troublin’ ye for your pan, then,” replied the first. “I’d no notion at all it was a Papist you were, or I wouldn’t have crossed your door-step.”

“There’ll be no livin’ in this street soon,” observed the other lady. “I think the agent had a right to let us know the sort that was takin’ thon house, the way we wouldn’t be makin’ mistakes.”

“Then ye needn’t be afeard of me wantin’ to have anything to say to any of yez,” retorted Norah, who had a high spirit as well as a quick temper of her own. “I’d be long sorry to make friends with such bigots as yourselves.”

She felt so much insulted and annoyed that she could not refrain from telling Hector what had occurred immediately he came in, and was keenly wounded to observe that, deeply as he resented the woman’s rudeness, he was also distinctly annoyed with herself for her imprudence in provoking it.

“Ye had no call to be tellin’ them what ye were,” he said. “What business is it of theirs?”

“I couldn’t make out to be ashamed of my religion,” returned Norah proudly. “I’ll never hide or deny it, Hector—ye mustn’t be expectin’ me to do that.”

Hector looked at her and said nothing. He could not help respecting her attitude; nevertheless, he considered within himself that it was not always necessary, or even advisable, to make full confession to all corners of one’s religious beliefs, or even of the principles which guided one in less vital matters. If even Norah were to know all that he himself thought and felt on the subject which was now agitating the whole country, the determination which was gradually forming in his mind to resist to the utmost any alteration in the existing order of things, she would be alarmed and offended. It was better for men, and women too, to keep their own counsel, to act when the time came for

action, according to the best of their judgment, and to avoid all unnecessary friction while refraining from premature discussion.

A few days after this he obtained permission to conduct his wife round the large shirt factory in which he was head engineer.

Norah was almost awestruck when she found herself in the first of the great workrooms, listening to the whirl of hundreds of machines, and looking at the rows and rows of women and girls who plied them.

By and by, when her bewilderment had somewhat subsided, and she began to observe them more closely, she was struck with the healthy, cheerful faces of the workers and their neat dress. Many of them were talking gaily, though their hands were moving with lightning swiftness. The long room was well lighted and not unpleasantly warm; Hector pointed out the electric appliances overhead which served, not only for ventilation, but for the absorption of dust and flying atoms of fluff.

"These girls won't get choked to death the same as my poor father," he observed. "Plenty of money's spent to keep this place healthy."

The smart young engineer attracted a certain amount of attention as he walked up and down the rows, explaining matters to the pretty girl whom he was conducting; heads were turned, and busy hands paused a minute as their owners replied to his questions.

"We'll begin at the beginning," said Hector. "This is the stuff the shirts are made of, ye see—all sorts, from that cheap striped calico to this lawn. Look at the fineness of this, Norah."

He took up a roll from a pile on one of the long shelves and slipped his hand beneath the folds.

"Look at thon: it must be worth I don't know how much a yard."

"Thon piece is worth five pounds, Mr. McTavish." said one of the cutters, overhearing him.

"Five pounds, and look at the piled-up shelves yon! There's some money in this place, I tell ye. Think of what the machines cost alone—an' think of the thousands of them they use here all of the best, and all up-to-date."

"What's that man there doin'?" inquired Norah, pointing to one of the few male workers in the room.

"He's cuttin' out shirt fronts, maybe fifty at a time—that circular knife 'ull slice through them all as if it was a bit of cheese. Look at the time that'll save. Now these women here are puttin' the pieces together ready for sewing, and these are stitchin' them. Come down to the end till I show ye the girls makin' button-holes."

"Why!" exclaimed Norah, as she hastened after him, "each of them seems to be workin' two machines at a time."

"So they do," returned he. "This machine cuts out the buttonhole, an' thon sews it and finishes it off—the machine does it all, ye see. She's only got to stick the stuff under and take it away—she's only time to turn from one to the other before each has its job done."

A man came up now, and nodding to Hector, looked with some surprise at Norah.

"I have leave from the manager to take my wife round," explained Hector, while in Norah's ears he murmured: "It's the foreman."

"Oh, is that so?" rejoined the new-comer, who spoke with a strong Scotch accent. "Take her round by all means, Mr. McTavish. I hope you're gettin' settled, Mrs. McTavish," he added pleasantly to Norah.

"I am, thank you, sir," said Norah, and she bobbed a little curtsy.

Hector frowned at her.

"What did ye do that for?" he whispered almost savagely. "He's not a bit better nor as good as myself."

"He spoke so quare—I thought it was a gentleman he was," she whispered back.

"He isn't, then—don't go makin' little of yourself. Hold up your head now, he's coming back."

The foreman, who was a gallant individual, and who had been struck and flattered by Norah's innocent deference, paid the young couple the undesired compliment of walking beside them, explaining the various operations in progress. How these girls did nothing but separate and turn in the tiny corners of the collars; how these others stamped the inner portion with the maker's name; how these others again—children who had just left school—rubbed ink upon the stampers.

"Aye," he repeated more than once, "it takes a lot of hands to make a shirt."

"I wonder they don't be gettin' tired," remarked Norah; "doin' nothin' but the same little thing hour after hour must be tedious."

"Aye, it's tedious, but they're well paid. They get to be like machines, so they do. They'll work up to the last minute so as not to lose a halfpenny. We're a thrifty lot here in Londonderry."

"We are that," agreed Hector.

"Yes, we may be proud of ourselves in Londonderry," resumed the other. "We send our goods out all over the world, so we do. We do a great colonial trade—thon's what I like to think of, well. Here in Londonderry we may say we feel we're in the heart of the Empire."

His face clouded over and he added in a different tone:

"Aye, if this Government 'ud let us alone we'd be doin' fine but the folks that rule us will not rest till

they have the Empire torn to shreds, and they'll begin by dismembering Ulster, or at least they'll try. But they're not likely to succeed, are they, Mr. McTavish?"

"They're not," said Hector shortly.

He took Norah by the arm and led her towards the stairway.

"I'll be takin' my wife to have a look at the ironing-room next," he explained. "Good morning, and thank ye."

"Good morning," repeated the other, then turning with a smile to Norah, he added, "Why don't we see ye at meetin' with your husband, Mrs. McTavish?"

Norah was opening her lips to answer, when Hector, coming between them, fairly hustled her out.

As the foreman repeated the question while they were mounting the stairs, he called back over his shoulder:

"Ye must give the woman time to settle down. Don't be talkin' to him at all, Norah," he added in a fierce whisper; "don't take any notice of what he says. What right had he to ask thon question?"

As they turned the angle of the stairs Norah stopped.

"It isn't right for ye, or for me ayther, to be lettin' on I'm a Protestant," she said.

"Nobody's any right to be speirin' about them things," retorted Hector hotly. "I'm not askin' ye to say what isn't true, but I'm askin' ye to keep your mouth shut. Ye have me to think on as well as yourself. It 'ud do me harm if it got about that I'd married a Catholic; all the head men here are Protestants."

"Do ye mean to say ye'd lose your place——" Norah began.

"I might, an' I mightn't," he interrupted, "but it 'ud do me harm, I tell ye. They wouldn't think so well of me. But I can't stop long from my work, so come along to the ironing-room."

"I will not," said Norah, with a trembling lip. "If I'm such a disgrace to ye as that, I'd best not be showin' my face here."

"Och, Norah, go on! What ails ye, to be snappin' me up that way? It's a wonder ye wouldn't be anxious not to be sayin' anything which might harm me."

"I'll not say anything to harm ye, if I can help it, but I'm not going to deny that I'm a Catholic if anybody axes me what's my religion. So I think it's best for me to go off with myself home," said she.

"Very well, then—thon's the way down," answered Hector, angry in his turn. "I'll be goin' back to the engine-room."

Norah marched downstairs, carrying her head high, and Hector waited till she had reached the bottom of the flight before descending in his turn.

He felt exasperated with Norah, in spite of a sort of unwilling admiration for her pluck and loyalty; he was dissatisfied with himself, and annoyed at the state of things which had caused this problem. His secret vexation presently found vent in words, when some chance remark of his subordinate in the engine-room called forth an outburst from the third hand.

"If I had my way," concluded this individual, "I'd sweep every Papist out of this town."

"Hold your tongue, there," cried Hector fiercely. "You're all mad here in this place. I'm as good a Unionist as any of ye, but I think the line should be drawn somewhere. Thon's no way for a Christian to talk!"

"Man," rejoined the other, "if the Catholics 'ud let us alone, we'd let them alone, but they want to ride over us, so they do; to squeeze us dry so that they may take our good money an' squander it. They're wantin' to have the prosperous North ruined and mismanaged, the same as the rest of the country. We'd be to work

an' slave so that they may tax us to run their Popish schools an' churches. All the jobs 'ull be for them—any money that comes into the country is to go into their pockets—no wonder we'd like to be shut of them."

"Aye," put in the second engineer, "sure they're fightin' among other already who's to get the best posts. A fella told me the other day in the street he'd very likely be havin' my job when this factory was taken over by the Catholics, after Home Rule was passed."

"Nonsense," said Hector.

"'Tisn't nonsense at all, well," returned the other, "they do be thinkin' they're goin' to be masters here out an' out—so they will be, too, if the rest of us don't make a stand an' fight for our liberties. What's to prevent them? There'd be but a handful of us in their damned Parliament—they could pass what laws they'd like."

"It'll not come to that," said Hector, feeling uncomfortable nevertheless. "England will stand by us."

"We've got to stand by ourselves," said the first speaker. "Mr. Redmond seems to think he's got England in his pocket. We've got to stand shoulder to shoulder an' fight our own battles."

"An' we will, too," said the second engineer. "You're a new-comer, you see, Mr. McTavish, an' mebbe ye don't know as much about Papists as we do here in Derry, but I tell ye, we'll all have to be lookin' out for ourselves. Would ye like to have a look at that?" he added, thrusting a grimy hand in his pocket and producing a much-thumbed pamphlet, "that'll open your eyes a bit."

Hector thanked him, and put the booklet in his own pocket.

He was distressed on reaching home to see that Norah was looking pale, and presently said to her with great tenderness:

"It's sorry I am, asthore, that things has fell out the way they have. I am sorry your feelin's were hurt that way this mornin', an' I'm as much annoyed as yourself that impudent fellow should have bothered ye with questions. I can see that you're right in bein' wishful not to deny your religion; my own father was the same. I wish from the bottom of my heart the two of us could believe the same, Norah——"

She looked at him with a sudden wild hope.

"Och, Hector, I'd give my life if ye could!"

"But since we can't," he resumed, raising his voice to drown hers, "the only thing we can do is to agree to differ—to agree to differ. I'll not be takin' ye any more among people that might vex ye. You an' me are enough for each other. We'll go out for walks, so we will. It's too hard you've been stickin' to the house lately. Let's make haste with our tea an' we'll go out."

They went quite a long way into the country that evening, and Hector played the lover as he had not done since they had wandered among the hills of Donegal, and they picked wild flowers—the last of the primroses, and the first of the bluebells. Norah put some of them in the little vases on her altar.

Hector said nothing, but presently, when Norah had gone to bed, he remained downstairs pondering over the pamphlet which had been lent to him by the second engineer.

CHAPTER XXIX

NORAH generally found Sunday an uncomfortable day: "agreeing to differ" was a painful process. She felt sad when she made her way alone to one or other of the crowded Catholic churches, and she felt a still keener pang when, later in the day, she saw Hector sally forth, looking so smart and handsome in his Sunday clothes, and thought how gladly she would have tripped beside him had he been going to Mass instead of to Meeting.

On fine days, however, she subsequently cheered up, for they would go out together in the afternoon. But when it was wet the hours lagged. Hector would read a newspaper, poring over it with a frowning brow. Now and then he would be quite short with Norah; and during the evening meal he would often be gloomy. Sometimes he would get up suddenly from table and go out, occasionally finding an excuse, such as the heat of the room, or his desire for fresh air, but more frequently would give no explanation.

Norah was not much of a reader, and though Hector had given her one or two books, it was more of a penance than a pleasure to her to try to master the contents.

She would laboriously write a letter to her mother, in which she informed her that she hoped she was quite well, that Hector and herself were quite well, thank God! that the house was grand now they had it papered, and that she hoped the cows would be doing finely for

Honor this year and that there was good news of Father Pat. This last item generally brought her to the fourth page, when she would conclude with a row of crosses which represented kisses, and now and then a smudged line at the end, expressing a wish that they might be meeting before so very long.

Once or twice after Hector had left her in the manner described, Norah would take up the paper which had seemed to call forth such anxious and vexatious thought, and would consult it in her turn.

The small print, however, seemed to run before her eyes, and the long words baffled her; nevertheless, she deciphered a line here and there which made her angry. Once she mustered up courage to attack Hector on his return.

"There does be terrible wicked people writin' in the newspapers," she said, speaking unsteadily, because her heart was beating so fast. "It's lies they do be tellin' mostly."

Hector looked at her sharply.

"What do you know about it?" he inquired, half amused, half angry.

"There's somethin' printed there about priests being wicked," said Norah, turning a little pale. "Sure, that's nonsense; sure, everyone knows the priests is good."

Hector laughed, not very pleasantly, and took up the paper.

"I must have missed that bit," he said. "Oh, is this it? 'Are Ulstermen to be made slaves of a cunning and tyrannical priesthood?'"

"Och, don't be readin' it to me," interrupted Norah, stopping her ears. "I wouldn't like to be listenin' to the like of that."

Hector folded up the paper and put it in his pocket. He drew down her hands and kissed her.

"You shouldn't have meddled with what doesn't concern you," he said. "Ye weren't intended to read that paper. Get a Catholic one for yourself if ye want to know the news."

On the following Saturday he brought home a certain "weekly" of Catholic and Nationalist views and tossed it on the table.

"Ye can be readin' that if it's wet to-morrow," he said.

On the next afternoon, therefore, while Hector studied his paper, Norah sat opposite him with hers open on her knee. After looking at the illustrations, however, and spelling out a few sentences of the serial, she gave up the attempt, and sat looking wistfully at Hector. By and by he laid down the sheet and met her eyes.

"You don't seem to be gettin' on very fast, little woman," he remarked, and leaning forward, took the journal from her hand. His smile vanished as he turned the pages, and finally he crumpled up the sheets.

"Of all the damned——" he was beginning, when he checked himself. He jumped up, strode into the kitchen and thrust it into the flames; his face was working with anger. "Talk about lies," he exclaimed. "All I can say is, it's well you're no great hand at the readin', if that's the stuff ye'd be studyin'. It's the last time that rag will come into the house."

"I wisht there was no such things as newspapers," said Norah piteously; then she added hesitatingly, "I don't think ye ought to be talkin' about Catholic things that way—Catholics is good."

"Protestants are bad, are they?" cried Hector, with blazing eyes.

Norah considered. "Not *you*," she said, "but there does be some bad wans in this place."

"Where did ye pick up that?" asked he fiercely.

"Why, ye know, Hector, I told ye what the woman I met above at the church the first Sunday I come here told me about the way they treated Catholics, an' tried to grind them down. Yourself said it was nonsense, but I don't think it can be altogether nonsense, for there's others says the same thing. There's a nice body in one of them little shops near the Long Tower that I do be talkin' to sometimes, and she says no Catholic boy has a chance at all here in Derry. Her own nephew had to go off out of it as soon as he'd done servin' his time—he couldn't get a place."

"Well, maybe there were good reasons for his not gettin' a place," said Hector. "There's not so much work for men in Derry. The best men get what jobs there are; Catholics are not overfond of hard work."

"That isn't it at all," retorted Norah, growing warm in her turn. "It's just spite—because they won't give Catholics a chance. This woman said it was the same story with everyone. As soon as a boy comes after a place they do be axin' him what school he attended, an' as soon as ever he names a Catholic school—off with him! And Mr. Murphy, where I do be gettin' the groceries, told me the only situations Catholic lads could be gettin' in Derry was in the public houses."

"Well, that ought to suit them," sneered Hector. "It's there they do like to be spendin' most of their time."

Norah did not echo his laugh; she was grave and not a little offended.

"Then there's Protestants as well as Catholics that likes a glass," said she, tossing her head. "I've seen many a one staggerin' down this street of an evenin'. Many a time I've wished myself out o' it, an' back at Cloon-na-hinch. If the people there does be takin' a drop too much, it's good-natured they are. It's long sorry they'd be before they'd insult anyone's religion."

Hector took her by the shoulders, not ungently, and made her turn so that she faced the light.

"Are ye wishin' ye hadn't got married to me, Norah?" he asked. His face was quite pale. In an instant she was all penitence and self-reproach.

"Indeed, I do not, avick—it's yourself ought to know that! Sure, ye know very well I'm wrapped up in ye, an' think the very light shines out of ye! Sure, ye know I wasn't meaning it, Hector! Och, what bewitched me to go losin' my temper that way? Och, will ye ever forgive me? It's the terrible bad temper I have—sure I know it was only teasin' me ye were, ye didn't rightly mean to insult my religion, no more than I did yours."

Hector drew a long breath. "We were near havin' a regular quarrel," he said; "you an' me, that hasn't been married six weeks yet. I don't know how it came about—I don't know how we got that far. It was that newspaper"—he laughed, this time not unkindly—"the newspaper which you couldn't even read, little woman."

She put her hand over his mouth.

"Ah, don't be goin' on, don't be thinkin' about it! Sure, what do them things matter? My poor Da—the Lord have mercy on him!—used to be sayin' that sometimes when Pat 'ud be gettin' excited. 'Sure, what do the politics matter?' he'd say. 'Let every man strive to do the will of God, and mind his duty, an' the politics will take care of themselves.'"

"Aye," said Hector softly, "an' your mother didn't bother her head about politics, either."

In his own mind he added, "But Pat's a real fire-brand!"

"Let's come out," he said aloud. "What matter if it's raining? A breath of air will blow away the cobwebs."

They went out, Norah clinging to his arm under the big umbrella, and splashing pluckily through the puddles. The air was warm but gusty, and every now and then an unexpected blast caught them unawares, making Norah's skirt balloon and sending Hector's hat whirling against the hedge.

Nevertheless they enjoyed the walk, and had wandered quite a long way when Hector suddenly looked at his watch.

"Why, it's six o'clock," he said. "It's starved altogether ye'll be. We had the wind behind us an' we goin', but it'll be in our faces goin' back. We'll not be home before eight o'clock."

"I'm not so much hungry as thirsty," said Norah.

"There doesn't seem to be a village or a house itself anywhere within sight," remarked Hector, furling his umbrella and looking round. "If there was a farm anywhere near I'd get ye a drink of milk."

"Oh, that 'ud be lovely!" exclaimed Norah. "I would like to see a farm hereabouts. I'd love to know if they manage it the same as we do at home."

"Let's climb up thon little hill, an' see if we can get sight of e'er a one," proposed Hector good-naturedly. "This is the real open country out here, an' the fields is tilled—there must be a farm-house somewhere."

They climbed up a gorse-grown hillock, whence they obtained a good view of the surrounding country, and to Norah's joy descried a group of farm buildings at no very great distance.

"Come on," cried Hector gleefully, "let's race for it—we'll get shelter, anyhow, for there's a regular down-pour comin' on—too heavy to last, I'm thinkin'."

When they reached the group of buildings aforesaid, they found that they consisted of a rather large farm-house, thatched and whitewashed, and a number of cowhouses and other appendages. Fowls were clucking

in the yard, unseen calves were bleating in a neighbouring shed; just inside the gate a large collie was lying, with its nose resting between its paws, its rusty coat glistening with rain-drops.

As Hector lifted the latch it sprang to its feet, growling and showing its teeth.

"He'll bite ye," cried Norah timidly.

"Not he," Hector was rejoicing, when the house door opened, and a young man in his shirt sleeves came out, who stared at the new-comers with surprise and the covert suspicion of the latter-day Northerner.

"Myself an' my wife 'ud be obliged if ye'd let us take shelter till the storm is over," said Hector. "We walked a bit too far, an' it's tired she is; she'd be glad of a drink of milk."

The young man looked at Norah and his face cleared; she herself was struck simultaneously with something familiar in his aspect.

"You're welcome," he said. "Will ye step inside—mind thon *sheugh!*" he cried quickly, as Hector inadvertently walked into the drain which traversed the yard.

"Mother!" called out the young man cheerfully, "I'm bringin' ye company the day. Call down the girls."

"The girls has gone into town," said a voice from the house.

"They'll no be able to get there in this storm," returned the other; "they'll have to turn back; it's comin' down in sheets now."

Throwing the door widely open he ushered the McTavishes into the house. The kitchen into which this door directly opened was a large one, with an earthen floor and ochre-washed walls. Its general aspect was cheerful and comfortable. There were geraniums in the wide windows, a bright fire on the

hearth, which was large enough to support two kettles, an enormous teapot banked round with cinders, and a frying-pan in which a cake was at that moment browning. A hen was comfortably ensconced on a sack to the left of the hearth, the heads of four turkey chicks protruding from beneath her breast; opposite the fire sat an old man also in his shirt sleeves, extending his feet, clad in knitted blue stockings, to the blaze. By the table at the opposite side a stout elderly woman was standing, buttering thick slices of household bread.

She laid down her knife and extended a brown, horny hand. "You're welcome, I'm sure," she said, but she looked from one to the other with a puzzled expression.

"That's my mother," said the young man, "and that's my father, Mr. James Brady; my sisters have started for town to Benediction, but I'm thinkin' they'll no get there. I do be seein' yourself often in the church," he added, turning smilingly to Norah.

She now realised why his appearance was familiar; she had, in fact, more than once seen him go round with the collecting plate.

Mrs. Brady's face lit up, and she hastily pulled forward chairs.

"Sit down the two of yez; we be to have tea in a minute. I wish those girls were in. I told them it was foolishness startin' off, an' it so wet as it is."

"Come to the fire an' dry yourselves," said the old man, thrusting his feet into his stout boots and pushing his chair to one side.

"Aye, dry yourselves," echoed his wife. "It'll be best for yez to have tea in here where it's warm—though we mostly take it in the parlour on a Sunday."

She threw open the door on the left of the entrance, displaying a large room, carpeted and comfortably furnished; the aspect of the whole place was prosperous in the extreme.

"Here are the girls back!" she exclaimed in a tone of relief, hearing a clatter in the yard, as a trap drawn by a small pony passed the window. Lusty shouts were heard from the back premises, and a minute afterwards two girls rushed into the house and halted laughing by the door, to shake their skirts and doff their dripping hats. They were stout, sonsy lasses, with bright eyes and rosy cheeks.

"It's near drowned we were," said one, peeling off her wet cotton gloves.

"The choir 'ull have to do without us for once," chimed in the other.

Then they stopped short, and looked inquiringly at Hector and Norah.

"We've visitors the day," announced their mother; "so I'm glad you're back. Hurry now, hurry! Heth, you're thinkin' long! Everyone's wantin' tea—the boy'll be in in a minute when the pony's put away."

"The visitors come in for shelter," announced the son of the house in an explanatory tone, seeing that his sisters still stared. "I've seen the young lady often in church. It's threepence she gave me this morning."

An expression, as of relief, immediately brightened both faces; they came forward, shaking hands cordially.

Hector shifted uneasily in his chair, opened his mouth as though to speak, and then, glancing at Norah's happy face, closed his lips again.

"I'm sure it's very good of yez to make us so welcome," she was saying to the new-comers. "It's new life to me to see a farm again—I'm a farmer's daughter myself."

"Is that so?" said Mrs. Brady, pausing in the act of turning over the cake in the pan.

"I am indeed. My poor father, the Lord have mercy on his soul! had one of the nicest farms at Cloonna-hinch—that's in Connemara. My mother is livin'

there now. Och, ma'am, she does be makin' the very same cakes as yourself, on'y it's a griddle she does be usin'."

"We have a griddle, too, then," rejoined Mrs. Brady, much interested; "but thon pan's quicker, an' you're not needin' such a big fire. Well, girls, you're thinkin' long—have ye the tea wet, itself? Go fetch the milk, Maggie. It's here we be takin' our tea the day, bein' warmer for Mr. and Mrs.——"

She paused inquiringly.

"McTavish," said Hector.

"Thon's not a Connaught name surely," said young James with a smile.

"No, my people come from Belfast," said Hector.

"Oh, indeed," remarked the young man with a slight change in his tone.

His father wheeled slowly in his chair and looked doubtfully from one to the other of the visitors, scratching his chin the while.

"But it's settled in Derry now, ye be?" said the younger of the two girls.

"Aye," said Hector briefly.

A quick look of intelligence passed round the Brady family, but by mutual consent they forbore to press for further information. With old-fashioned and hearty hospitality they devoted themselves instead to ministering to the wants of their guests, though in their thrifty Northern fashion they saw to it that the ordinary routine of work was not neglected; so, while Maggie spread a clean white cloth and cut baker's bread, and made a special pot of tea for the visitors, her mother continued to prepare thick rounds of bread and butter, each of which was surmounted by a slab of the newly made cake, and to pour out tea of inky blackness from the receptacle which had been so firmly embedded in the coals, into two large bowls, putting a double spoonful of

brown sugar, and a copious supply of milk into each. Rose, the second girl, carried these over to a side table, and presently two men came in, and each possessing himself of a three-legged stool, took up a position beside it, and fell to work without more ado.

The Brady family now sat down to their own meal, Mrs. Brady plying the teapot, while the girls dispensed bread and butter and thick slices of barm-brack, chatting eagerly the while with Norah, who was gaily making comparisons between the farming methods of the North and West. Young James was much interested in this discussion; but Mrs. Brady's whole attention seemed to be absorbed by the teapot, while the master of the house ate and drank in silence, smiling good-humouredly now and then to show that his lack of conversation was produced by no ill-feeling.

The two farm hands conversed in undertones, Hector catching a phrase now and then, which caused him to look round with surprise and evident disapproval. By and by the voices at the side table were slightly raised, and old James, noticing a frown on Hector's brow, inquired sharply:

"What's that talk ye have over there? It's too much of it ye have."

One of the men, a bronzed, red-bearded fellow, looked round.

"It's what he says—that forty thousand men from Donegal 'ull be marching into Derry if there's any trouble over Home Rule."

The other looked over his shoulder in his turn.

"It's only the truth I'm after telling him," he asserted in a rich brogue: there was no mixture of "Scotch" blood in this man. He was blue-eyed and dark-haired; all his features were typical of the Western peasant.

"Forty thousand men," he repeated emphatically. "The grandest boys in the world! Six feet high, every

one of them, an' that broad across the shoulders they wouldn't be able to get in at that door! R'ared on potatoes an' fish, so they are—not a ha'p'orth else, an' nothing at all to do for the better part of the year. Sure, once they have the potatoes in the ground an' the fish caught, what have they to do?"

"Troth, they wouldn't suit us so very well here," said Mrs. Brady good-humouredly, her attention momentarily withdrawn from the teapot.

"They'd suit you well enough if there was fightin' to be done," retorted he. "They'd sweep the whole of Derry—aye, an' Belfast too, so they would—they'd drive every Protestant in the place before them."

"That'll do, that'll do," said old Brady, with a hasty glance at Hector. "It's wild talk that ye have there. There's too much talk about Catholics an' Protestants. What I'd like 'ud be to see them shake hands. I would so."

Hector's brow cleared, and, as Mrs. Brady now replenished his cup, he remarked on the rich quality of the milk which she poured into it.

"My wife there," he said, nodding at Norah, "'ud be glad to come out some day an' have a look round. She's a farmer's daughter herself, as she told ye the now."

"Aye, she'd be welcome," said Mrs. Brady.

"It's clearing up a bit," cried Maggie, glancing out of the window. "We might be showing Mrs. McTavish the cows after we have our tea taken. They haven't been turned out into the field yet."

After tea, therefore, the female members of the Brady family conducted Norah round the premises, Hector remaining behind out of politeness to Mr. Brady, who was not disposed to leave the warm kitchen.

Mrs. Brady led the way with a shawl thrown over her head, for though it had ceased raining the wind was

still fresh; her daughters, with their Sunday gowns tucked up over starched white petticoats, jumped over puddles, and threaded their way cautiously across the more muddy portions of the "byre," as they called the farmyard.

There were sixteen beautiful cows chewing their cuds in the long cow-house; half a dozen horses, besides the white pony of which Norah had caught a glimpse, were stabled for the night; there were calves, and pigs, and chickens, and countless trim ricks of hay and straw.

"We've done our threshing," one of the girls announced proudly.

After the gloom which seemed to overhang the town, it was cheerful to see these pleasant country faces, and the whole family's joy in their possessions.

"If ye stand up on thon high ground by the gate," said Mrs. Brady, "an' look round ye, as far as ye can see is our land."

"Think o' that!" exclaimed Norah, in awestruck tones. "It must be a terrible big farm then."

"It's three farms we have," returned she proudly. "We're after buying the last this year. Here's Mr. McTavish comin' out to look for us."

"I think we ought to be goin' home now it's fine," explained Hector, coming up to them. "Did I hear ye say ye had this farm bought, Mrs. Brady?"

"We have the three of them bought," recapitulated Mrs. Brady with a beaming face.

"An' was it under the Land Purchase Act ye got them?" said he with interest.

Mrs. Brady nodded.

Hector was about to make some comment, when Maggie came running up, her honest rosy face wreathed in smiles, holding a little basket of eggs.

"I'm after pickin' up these in the hen-house," she said. "Maybe ye'd like to take them back with ye."

They were all laid to-day, an' fresh eggs isn't easy come by in a town."

Norah accepted the offer gratefully, and after saying farewell, and promising to come again, Hector and she set off homewards.

"That's the real nice family, isn't it?" asked she as they hastened along.

He agreed warmly.

"An' the old man's sensible too," he added. "Did ye hear how he stopped thon fella's blathers? I'll engage the Bradys are in no hurry for Home Rule. It's doin' well they are, an' prosperin' under the Union. Do ye mind the cottages we saw standin' back in the fields behind their place? Those are labourers' cottages, built with English money. Elevenpence a week is all they pay, so Mr. Brady was tellin' me. That's the way it works, ye see. The farmer needn't pay such high wages, because the labourer needn't pay such high rent, so they're doin' well all round."

"That's grand," commented Norah. She understood very imperfectly what he was saying, but rejoiced that he was evidently in a good humour, and that these new friends of theirs—who were Catholics—had so favourably impressed him.

"Aye, they're prosperin' finely," he went on; "an' they're the right sort of people to prosper, workin' early an' late, never wastin' a minute, makin' most of all their opportunities. There's the North for ye! Ye heard Mrs. Brady say that thon folks their labourers was braggin' about 'ud not suit them. No more they would. Idle more than half their time, an' braggin' an' fightin' the rest. No; give me men of the right sort that's anxious to get on in the world; men that know how to go about their work, an' that'll do it well, an' do as much of it as they can."

He walked on almost too rapidly for Norah to keep

up with him. His head was thrown back, his chest inflated, his eyes, bright though they were, looked out from beneath narrowed lids as though fixed on some distant object.

Norah, trotting breathlessly by his side, failed to understand his mood; but, as a matter of fact, Hector was in the grip of what might be called "the spirit of the North," a hardy, far-seeing, indomitable spirit resolutely bent on its own ends, determined to uphold its own ideal, scorning weaklings and backsliders, pitilessly bearing down all opposition.

CHAPTER XXX

Two events of special importance stood out among the happenings of the young couple's life during the ensuing six months.

The first was a visit to Belfast.

The firm which employed Hector, having reason to make an important change in some of the machinery of the engine-room, sent him to that city to study for himself the working of similar engines in the chief city of the North.

As Hector's expenses were paid, he could, for a very little additional outlay, allow Norah to accompany him on this expedition, and the pair spent two marvellous days in the busy city.

Norah was at first lost in admiration and wonder over the fine buildings, the huge mills and shipyards, the crowds of workers; but by and by she began to feel depressed. The Belfast people were even more dour in manner, and short in speech, than the Derry folk.

"Nobody here seems to have time to say a word to ye," she complained to her husband.

"That's a good thing, well," rejoined he. "They know that 'time's money' here in Belfast, an' they'll no' be for wastin' it, no more than they do anything else in this place."

"It would not cost anybody much to spare people a smile now an' again, though," retorted Norah; "but they do be frownin' at ye here as if ye'd done something awful on them before they know ye at all."

Hector answered her gravely.

"They're cautious by nature, for one thing," he said; "and these is times when ye scarcely know who's your friend."

Norah pondered, and then sighed.

"Well, God be with poor Cloon-na-hinch," said she. "If there isn't much money in the place, an' if people isn't that busy——"

Hector interrupted with a scornful laugh.

"Busy!" he echoed. "One-half of their time, if not more, the men is sittin' kickin' their heels on the stone walls, an' the women is gossipin' on the door-steps!"

"We are kind to one another in Cloon-na-hinch, though," cried Norah quickly. "We don't let everybody shift for themselves the way they do up in the North. If anybody's in trouble, the neighbours 'ull be ready to help and pray for them; an' if anybody's sick they'll go an' see them an' sit by them. But in Derry ye might be dead an' buried before anybody 'ud care, an' I'm sure they'd be the same here."

"Well, they'd have more sense nor to go sit with a man that's down with the fever, an' catch it, an' pass it on to their own families," sneered Hector. "That's the way they do be murderin' half the countryside in Connemara for want of a bit of sense. As for people bein' in trouble, it's mostly through their own fault if they are, with drink and laziness. The neighbours 'ud do them more good to tell them so plain, nor to be prayin' for them, an' maybe followin' their example."

"You're awful hard, Hector," murmured Norah, in a low voice, "an' ye don't understand." After a pause she went on: "There's one thing, if we're not ever an' always strivin' to get on in this world, we're not forgetful of the next."

She was not sufficiently articulate to express her thought clearly, or to define the very obvious fact to

which she alluded: namely, that to the Western peasant—who with all his faults and failings is a spiritually-minded person—the prospect of that other world towards which he is journeying is so perpetually present that, in truth, it often seems to him scarcely worth while to better his condition in this.

But Hector, misunderstanding her, turned to her sharply.

“Do ye mean to tell me *we’re* not releegious here in the North?” he cried.

Norah quailed before his glance.

“Och, no; that wasn’t what I was meanin’,” she said. She changed the subject presently, and inquired in a timid voice: “Are we goin’ to see your mother while we’re here?”

He paused, cogitating a moment, and then said quickly:

“I think it’s better not. She’ll no’ be expectin’ us. Her an’ me’s lost sight of each other this many a year. It’s better not.”

“But she’s your mother,” urged Norah diffidently. “If anything was to happen her ye’d be sorry ye didn’t make friends.”

“I’d be sorry she behaved the way she did,” returned Hector, “an’ I’d be wishful I *could* have kept friends with her. But as things has fell out, I wouldn’t be blamin’ myself for doin’ what I think is right now.”

The colloquy took place in their small lodgings, Hector being in the act of smartening himself up in preparation for sallying forth on his employers’ business. He was fastening on a clean, stiff collar as he spoke, and Norah, from where she sat, could see the reflection of his strong face, with its keen eyes and square jaw, in the glass. A certain fear of him, of which she had lately been conscious, crept into her heart.

"Do ye never forgive them that offends ye?" she asked in a low voice.

Hector fastened the button of his collar, and turned his head from side to side to ascertain if it sat comfortably, before replying.

"I forgive them in a Christian way, because I wouldn't wish ill to them; but I don't feel the same to them, an' I don't keep up a pretence of feelin' the same to them."

"You're not like me, then," said Norah impulsively. "I'd fly out many a time an' get into a terrible passion; but it's 'forgive and forget' with me as soon as it's over."

"Aye, we are different," said Hector musingly; then turning, he took her little pointed chin in his hand and looked into her eyes. "Don't ye ever fly intill a terrible passion with me," he said, "for I warn ye I'm not one that 'ud forget it, even to you."

This conversation left Norah slightly depressed, and a little incident which occurred on the same day aroused in her a vague uneasiness.

Hector returned from his tour of inspection in high spirits, and more than ever delighted with the power and greatness of the city where such wonders were evolved. Norah was bewildered by his eulogies, dazed by the figures which he enumerated in triumphant confirmation of the fact that they were well deserved. Men and millions were alike ticked off in rolling numbers; the nature of the works which employed the one and amassed the other was described in terms which she found equally incomprehensible.

"Think of the brains that planned inventions like thon," exclaimed he proudly. "Think of the kind o' men they must be that has the power to climb up that way—to lift themselves an' to lift others, an' to start an industry that's heard of all the world over."

They were strolling arm in arm along a crowded street while Hector was thus giving vent to his enthusiasm, and suddenly a man who had been walking a little in front of them, turned, and looked him in the face.

"Well said!" he cried. "It's what we all ought to be callin' to mind now, for we've got to stand by others if we want to keep what we've got. Why, McTavish, it's never you!"

"It is though," said Hector; and his face changed. Amid the pleasure of recognising an old acquaintance there was a kind of doubt, a shade of something that might almost be called shame.

"What's become of ye this long while?" went on the other.

"Oh, I'm living in Derry now, for one thing," responded Hector quickly, "an' I've got married for another," he went on, with an awkward laugh.

"Is that so?" rejoined his interlocutor. "Well, a man can work as well in Derry as Belfast. You're doin' what ye ought to do, I hope; ye've joined our ones over there?"

"I'll call round an' see ye this evening, Mr. McNeill," interrupted Hector quickly. "Least said soonest mended, ye know."

He glanced at Norah, and the other man smiled grimly.

"Oh, aye," he said. "I understand thon. A man can't be too careful these times. Ye can drop in at the old place the night."

"Who was that?" asked Norah as they walked on in the wake of Hector's friend, who preceded them rapidly.

"It's a man I used to know," replied her husband evasively.

"What did he mean by 'goin' on with the good work' an' 'joinin' their ones'?" continued she.

"Ask me no questions an' I'll tell ye no lies," returned Hector laughingly.

"I think it's a quare thing ye should have secrets from your own wife," exclaimed Norah indignantly. Her cheeks were red and her eyes sparkling.

"I think thon warnin' I gave ye about not flyin' into a passion was needed," remarked her husband. "Do ye mind it, Norah?"

She checked her rising anger then, but remained dissatisfied and uneasy.

On returning to Derry her husband's absences from home became more frequent than before. He would often go out on his motor-bicycle of an evening, but on his return would give her no account of the excursions which he had presumably taken. A subdued excitement seemed to possess him on these occasions, varied with fits of moodiness and taciturnity.

This state of things puzzled and alarmed Norah. She felt as though a cloud were drifting between herself and husband, a cloud which, in spite of her efforts, she was unable to penetrate.

An incident, trifling in itself, at least so it might have appeared to many people, tended to have serious results for a time.

One evening, when Norah was kneeling before her little altar, praying with much devotion and not a few tears, she was startled by the crash of broken glass, and a large stone fell at her feet. Another, following hard upon it, hit the splintered glass of the little window and very nearly struck her. Hector came rushing upstairs just as Norah extinguished her candles and crouched down beside the bed; but he saw the wicks still glowing and guessed what had happened.

"What is it you're doin' at all?" he asked angrily. "Is it kneeling before yon statue ye are, with the blind up?"

As she did not answer he strode to the window and looked out.

"It's the people at the house opposite that broke this window on us, but there's a crowd gatherin' in the street. I thought ye'd have a bit more sense."

"Sure, what harm was I doin' anyone if I was sayin' my prayers?" returned Norah tearfully.

Hector jerked down the blind before replying, so that his figure was no longer visible. His voice sounded strange in the darkness.

"Ye know what Protestants think of the worshippin' of images," he said

He groped his way across the room and struck a match, lighting the candle with a hand that shook a little.

"Och, Hector, ye know very well I don't worship the statue," Norah was protesting when he cut her short.

"It looks as if ye did then. We'll be havin' a riot in the street if you go on this way. These is times when ye have to mind yourselves. Put thon image in the drawer for the present. It'll take no harm there, an' it's best out of the way for a bit."

"Och, Hector—the statue that my Da gave me!" pleaded Norah.

"Put it away," commanded Hector obstinately. "Or would ye like me to put it away for ye?"

"I would not," returned Norah.

She got up from her knees, wrapped the statue carefully in a clean handkerchief, and laid it in a drawer. She forbore to reproach her husband for what she took to be a grave breach of faith, but her heart was very sore.

Matters remained on this uncomfortable footing till Norah made a discovery which altered all her world. When she told Hector that a child was coming to them she was almost surprised at the joy and tenderness with which he received the announcement.

The only drawback to her happiness was her husband's unwillingness to allow her to go to Cloon-nahinch for her confinement.

"What would I be doin' without ye, then?" he inquired almost sharply.

"I thought maybe ye might get a holiday an' come too," faltered she.

"That 'ud never do," said he. "Thon ones 'ud think it no sort of way for me to be goin' on, an' me such a short time in the place. Tell your mother to come here. She's more than welcome, well; an' she'd be a great standby to myself. It's anxious I'll be thon time. Ye had a right to think o' that."

Norah smiled at him lovingly.

"It'll be hard for Mother to get away from home, though," she said hesitatingly, after a pause. "She's not used to travellin', an' there's nobody about the place to look after things for her."

"She has plenty of friends an' neighbours," retorted Hector. "Who would look after me if I were to be without the two of ye? Why should I be the one to go to the wall?" He spoke half jestingly, but in his heart the thought shaped itself: "Why should my child be born away from the North?"

Norah, overcome with confusion, hastened to exculpate herself from the implied reproach. Of course she had never dreamt of forsaking him. Her mother would, she was sure, understand the way it was and come to her instead.

Thereupon Hector's countenance cleared, and from that day forward the good understanding which had marked the first weeks of their married life seemed to return.

They were drawn together once more in close and happy union, and Norah sang about the house as she had not done for many days.

CHAPTER XXXI

"I'm after havin' a letter from Father Pat," remarked Norah one morning. "He says he'll be payin' us a visit next week."

"That's good news!" exclaimed Hector.

He had always felt a real affection for his foster-brother, and was honestly rejoiced at the prospect.

"He's going to Armagh on business," went on Norah, referring to the letter and laboriously spelling it out. "He'll be able to stop a couple of nights."

"That's grand," said Hector. He got up quickly, however, and stood looking out of the window with a puzzled expression. It would be delightful to see Pat, but a little awkward to have a priest staying in the house. What would the neighbours say?

"I must be gettin' our spare room ready," went on Norah joyfully. "It's delighted he'll be with the house. I hope he'll be able to run home soon, to tell my mother about it. But if he can't go see her, he'll be able to write, anyway. He's a better hand at the writin' nor I am."

"What day is he comin'?" inquired Hector, trying to speak joyfully too.

Norah spread out the document on the table, and surveyed it with her head on one side.

"He writes such a quare, crabby hand," she said. "Here's a 't,' an' there's an 's.'"

"Tuesday?" suggested her husband.

"Maybe so," said Norah doubtfully. "No, Thurs-

day—that's what it is. He'll be comin' on Thursday. I can't quite make out the time."

"Thursday, between six an' seven," said Hector, reading over her shoulder.

"What's this at all down here?" went on Norah, who had been pondering over a postscript.

Hector took up the letter and read:

"'You had best go to see your parish priest between this an' then, the way I'll be able to say Mass for ye in the morning. Tell him I'll have my papers, of course. . . .' What in the world is the meanin' of that? Is it here in this house he's thinkin' of sayin' Mass?"

Hector's voice rang sharp, but Norah clapped her hands together in rapture.

"Och, wouldn't that be lovely!" she exclaimed. "That 'ud bring the rale blessin' on ourselves an' the house, Hector."

Her face was radiant with happiness. Hector turned away abruptly and stood looking out of the window once more, his hands clenched.

"After all, it's my house," he said, when he could control his voice. "It's my leave he ought to be askin'."

"Och, Hector, sure he knows it's your house. I can't rightly make out the letter; but I'll go see the parish priest, an' maybe he'll know. I wisht Pat had told us what he wanted. Maybe it's only to say Mass up above in the church. There used to be a strange priest stayin' now an' again with Father O'Flaherty, an' then there used to be an extry Mass."

Hector went out before she finished speaking, and Norah, with her joy somewhat damped, set about her daily work with speed, being anxious to have the matter which preoccupied her thoughts cleared up. It was with some diffidence that she set out for her

interview. She had never called on any of the Londonderry priests before, having, indeed, an unconquerable shrinking from entering into explanations of the circumstances of her marriage, and admitting the fact that her husband was not a Catholic. She accomplished her religious duties with regularity, but had never sought to become personally acquainted either with the priests, or with the nuns who taught in the schools, looked after the girls and young women, and were on such friendly terms with all the Catholic inhabitants of the town.

She emerged from the presbytery presently, however, with a brisk step and light heart. The priest, though a little surprised, and, indeed, as she fancied, a little hurt at her having resided so many months in the town without making herself known to him or any of his brethren, had explained her brother's letter to her entire satisfaction.

"He couldn't say Mass in your house, child, without a very special reason, but of course he can say Mass here. I'll arrange for a boy to serve it. You'll be coming up to hear it, of course, and your husband too."

"I'll be comin', your Reverence," Norah had said, and then she had hastily taken leave of him.

"I'll get Father Pat to be tellin' him how it is with us," she said to herself.

It was almost a relief, under the circumstances, to realise the impossibility of having Mass in the house, as Hector, though he had not absolutely opposed it, had clearly not liked the idea. Norah dreaded his being out of humour during her brother's visit.

He accepted the explanation which she hastened to give him with evident satisfaction, and said nothing as to his secret misgivings regarding the comments of the neighbours.

Norah, for her part, accomplished her preparations

with pride and joy, and awaited Father Pat's advent with eager expectation.

He arrived about seven o'clock on the Thursday evening, beaming with brotherly love and pleasure; wringing Hector's hand in a mercilessly cordial grasp, and seeming to fill the little house with his big, genial presence.

"Upon my word, you're looking grand, Norah! And how's Himself, the old married man? I declare, Hector, I'd hardly know ye, you're so grand and sedate. Earning tons of money, Norah does be telling me. Isn't it a master engineer ye are?"

"Head engineer," corrected Hector with a smile.

"Well, it's much the same. You're looking prosperous enough, anyhow; and here's my little Norah as fine as the queen in a dressy blouse—isn't that what they do be calling it? Nobody 'ud ever think she was used to wearing a bawneen."

"Sit down, sit down," interrupted Norah, forcing him hospitably to a chair. "Ye must be famished."

"I am that," admitted he. "I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast. What's this, Norah—a griddle cake? Ah, God bless ye! it was the very thing I was hankering after."

"I thought I'd try my hand at it," said Norah, "an' it turned out very well for me. Will ye cut the ham, Hector? An' there's a cold boiled fowl too."

"Here, let me," said Father Pat, throwing down the slice of griddle cake which he had cut for himself, and seizing a carving-knife and fork. He hacked off a leg, and, holding it impaled on the fork, flourished it before Hector. "Will ye start with that?" he asked. "Norah won't be ready for hers yet. This is a lovely fowl, Norah, and as well boiled as ever I saw. You're the great cook. I must be telling my mother all about it."

"Did ye see her lately?" asked Norah.

"I saw her last month. I just ran over for an hour or two on the motor-bike. Aye, the old motor-bike is going yet, Hector. How's yours? Have ye got it still?"

"I've got it," said Hector; "but I'm not using it at present."

He had been laughing at his brother-in-law's breeziness, but a sort of constraint seemed to fall over him as he said the last words. This left him, however, when Father Pat began to talk of Honor, of her courage amid her loneliness, of the energy with which she devoted herself to the farm.

"It's a man's work she does be doing," said Father Pat, "and upon my word she manages to get a man's work out of Billy Brophy too, and it takes a clever body to do that, I can tell ye."

He ate an enormous meal, talking volubly the while. Hector listened and laughed. The cloud which had fallen between them at the time of the marriage seemed to be lifted. Even the sadness of those days was forgotten. They met as brothers and comrades once more.

"No; I'll have no more tea," said Father Pat at last, pushing back his cup. "I have a bit of Office to say yet, though, before I go to bed, so I mustn't be dallying too long. But wait a minute; I was near forgetting. Where's this ye put my coat, Norah?"

"It's hangin' outside on the rack in the hall," rejoined she.

Father Pat rose hastily, plunged across the room and into the hall, returning with his breviary and a parcel wrapped in a newspaper. This he tore off, revealing a black bottle which he set upon the table.

"There, now," he cried gaily. "That's a bottle of port wine, so it is, which a grocer over at Ballyfoy sent to me yesterday. I thought I'd bring it along with

me, and it 'ud be a nice present to yourself and Hector. Port wine it is. Have ye any glasses handy, Norah? I'll drink your health and Hector's, and you can drink mine; then I'll go up to my room and finish my Office. Have ye a corkscrew, Hector?"

Hector, whose face had stiffened once more at the young priest's allusion to his "Office," handed him the corkscrew without speaking, and watched Father Pat, as, with exaggerated caution, he drew the cork.

"I believe ye do have to be very careful the way ye open port wine," said the young priest innocently. "There does be a crust on it which should not be disturbed." He dusted the neck of the bottle with his forefinger and sniffed at it knowingly. "That's grand stuff," he exclaimed exultingly. "It has the—what do ye call it?—the right bookay."

The port, which might be valued at anything between one and ninepence and two and four, was not precisely of vintage quality, but Father Pat smacked his lips over the inky liquid in his glass with guileless and complete satisfaction.

"Here's your health, Norah and Hector," he said, "and may God bless ye both." He beamed affectionately at them, and sipped appreciatively, subsequently holding up his glass to the fading light after the manner of connoisseurs.

"The same to you," said Norah affectionately. She, too, sipped and then set down her glass.

"Your health, Pat," said Hector.

"We'll cork the bottle up now till to-morrow," said the young priest. "It'll come in handy on a Friday. There's no fast on drink, thank God! Upon my word, I must write and tell Mr. Fogarty how much we appreciate his present. You're not taking yours, asthore."

"I've never drank wine, an' I'm afraid it might make me sick; and ye know, Pat, I have the pledge took till

I'm twenty-one, the same as all the girls an' boys at Cloon-na-hinch."

"Och, to be sure, so ye have," said Father Pat. "Well, ye mustn't be breakin' it, must ye, Norah? Here, give us your glass over here; we won't let it go to waste—unless you'd like it, Hector—but sure, you'd be welcome to fill up yours out of the bottle."

"No, thank you," said Hector. "The one glass is enough for me. I've had a lot of tea. I'm just takin' it to drink your health."

"I'm obliged for the compliment," said Father Pat. "I've had three cups of tea for that matter, but ye see how well able I am to drink a couple of glasses of port wine."

Hector, who for the last few minutes had been struggling with an inward sense of scandalised exasperation, now broke out:

"Aren't priests teetotallers, then?"

"Some of them are, and some not," rejoined Father Pat cheerfully. "I had the pledge taken the same as Norah till I was twenty-one, but I don't keep it up altogether now. I take a glass of wine or a tumbler of punch now an' again, the same as anybody else. Are you a teetotaller, Hector?"

"No," rejoined Hector shortly, "but I think it 'ud be a good thing if all ministers of relection were."

"Maybe it 'ud be good for ministers if the rule was made," said Father Pat, with his jovial laugh. "Ye'd better talk to your Moderator, or whatever ye call him, about that. But you're not Pope yet, so ye needn't be making rules for priests."

Hector finished his wine and set down the glass.

"Ye'd best clear away, Norah," he said shortly. He took his pipe from his pocket, and at the sight of it Father Pat, who had risen from his chair, sat down again.

"I'll wait an' have a bit of a smoke with ye before I go up," he said. "Norah, if you look in the pocket of my outside coat ye'll find a little packet of cigarettes."

Hector watched the priest with an expression of marked disapproval as he lit one of the cigarettes which his sister brought him.

"Ye seem to indulge most of your lancies," he remarked, puffing at his own pipe. "I wouldn't think it right to be smokin' cigarettes. It's a bad habit, and an extravagant one."

Father Pat laughed, and blew a cloud of smoke through his nostrils; as a matter of fact, these cigarettes had been procured from a penny-in-the-slot machine, while he had been endeavouring to get through a tedious wait at the junction. He was not particularly enjoying his smoke, which was, if Hector had known it, an unfamiliar indulgence, given way to on this occasion out of a sense of high holiday-making, and a desire to promote good-fellowship. But he was not going to tell his brother-in-law this; the latter's scandalised attitude irritated, if it amused, him.

"A few cigarettes now an' again won't ruin anybody," he said.

Hector puffed for a few moments in silence, and then said sneeringly:

"I always thought Catholics set up for being such great ones for denying themselves. Norah, there, 'ud sooner starve nor eat a bit of meat on a Friday."

"And she's right," interrupted Father Pat.

"A bit of good meat 'ud do nobody any harm," resumed Hector; "but drink does do harm, and you're just after tellin' me yourself there's no fast on drink."

"Did ye never hear that sayin' before?" inquired Father Pat affably; "it's a true one too. No more there is any fast on drink."

"How do you explain that?" said Hector. "I'm be-

ginnin' to think that the quare things people does be sayin' about priests is mostly true."

Pat sat up at this, his face, which had before been laughing, suddenly becoming serious.

"I'll tell you one thing, Hec," he said, still speaking good-humouredly. "I've no notion at all of getting into arguments with ye. Ye know as well as I do myself that there should be moderation in all things, in food as well as drink. There is a particular reason why we are bound to fast and abstain on certain days and seasons. I'd explain it to ye if ye were in earnest, but I can see very well your only reason for askin' is to catch me tripping—to put me in the wrong—so I'll just thank ye to mind your own business. Of course, if it was in earnest ye were, if it was for any good reason ye wanted to know the teaching of the Church, I'd have all the pleasure in life telling ye."

"If I wanted to turn Catholic, I suppose you mean," returned Hector with flashing eyes. "Thank ye, I have no inclination that way at all."

He got up, knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and went out, slamming the door behind him.

Father Pat looked across at Norah, who had paused in the act of piling her tray with crockery, and she looked back at him apologetically.

"Am I after driving him away?" asked Father Pat.

"Och, don't be mindin' him," said Norah; "he does often be rushin' out that way, particularly if he gets put out. I think myself it's all this talk about Home Rule that has him upset."

"Well, everybody's talking about Home Rule these times," rejoined her brother; "but I'm afraid Hector's got bitter against Catholics."

"They're all bitter here," said Norah. "I think it's the talk he does be hearin', an' the papers he does be readin', an' them little books—he does be readin' a lot

of little books, an' the frown that's on him while he's at them 'ud frighten ye."

Pat heaved an impatient sigh, and then looked anxiously at his sister.

"But he hasn't ye in dread of himself, has he?" he asked. "It's kind to ye he is."

"Indeed, he is kind," she replied warmly. "A better husband never stepped! Ye wouldn't think how lovin' an' thoughtful he is for me every way; he'd give me anythin' in the world I axed for."

"Well, well, that's right," returned he, still anxiously scanning her face, which was now flooded with colour. "And he doesn't interfere with ye about religion?"

"Och, no, indeed he doesn't. He's as good as his word—he'd never break his promise, so he wouldn't!"

"Well, we must be praying for him, and I must be trying to keep the peace for your sake, Norah; now, since he's gone out, I may as well be saying my Office here. Give me the breviary."

She handed him his book, and, moving his chair near the lamp, Father Pat found his place and began to read. He murmured the Latin words half aloud, his expression entirely re-collected and devout. The face which was illuminated by the light of the lamp was a typical peasant face, such a one as might as well have befitted a ploughman, or a fisherman, as surmounted a Roman collar; but, nevertheless, when Father Pat bent over the breviary, his face bore the stamp of something that was above and beyond all that was merely human—the visible expression of the faith that was in him, of the call which had set him apart from his fellows.

CHAPTER XXXII

HECTOR had finished breakfast and gone to his work when Father Pat and Norah came back from the church where the priest had been saying Mass, and the brother and sister had a quiet meal together.

Father Pat had a few minutes' conversation in the vestry with the priest who had seen Norah some days previously, and by and by he related to her what had transpired during this interview.

"Father — was quite surprised to hear about ye being so long in this place," he said; "he was wondering ye hadn't been to see him. He was askin' me had ye ever made friends with the nuns."

Norah hung her head.

"I did not, then, Father Pat," she said. "I didn't like to be tellin' any of them the way it is with me an' Hector. I'm always afear'd they'll think so bad o' me for not marryin' a man of my own religion, and the Protestants is just the same with Hector. He doesn't like any of them to be knowin' he has a Catholic wife."

"But you're not ashamed of your religion?" cried Father Pat. "Ye don't be giving in to him and hiding it?"

"I do not, indeed," protested Norah earnestly. "I told Hector I'd never deny my religion. But it makes the two of us quare with other, sometimes; there's always one thing we don't like to be talkin' about, an' it the greatest of all. And there's somethin' I done that maybe wasn't right."

"What's that?" asked her brother, as she paused. His face was very grave now.

She told him then the episode of the broken window, and how Hector had insisted on her hiding away her precious statue lest she might draw down on herself the animosity of the neighbours.

"But I do be gettin' it out sometimes when he's away at his work," she added; "an' I pull down the blind an' say my beads with the door locked."

"That's no way for ye to be goin' on," said Father Pat, leaning across the table and speaking very earnestly. "If ye pull down the blind the neighbours can't know what ye're doin'; and it isn't right for a Catholic to be hidin' all the outward signs of her religion. Ye'll be apt to forget Catholic ways altogether, Norah, if ye begin like this the first year ye're married, an' there's more than ye to be thinking of. My mother told me the way it is with ye, and that there'll be a little one here before very long. Ye mustn't do anything to deprive your child of its rights. It ought to have the Catholic atmosphere and training at home as well as at school; and if ye begin by hiding away the things that should remind ye of your religion, ye won't be able to make a stand later on."

"I do be often breakin' my heart about that," said Norah in a low voice. "But I thought maybe it was better for peace' sake——"

"No," said Pat, "ye oughtn't to give way on a point like that. Hector's a man of his word, ye say, and he promised ye the free exercise of your religion. There never was a Catholic yet that didn't venerate the holy Mother of God, and like to have a statue of her where they could see it. Get yours out at once and explain to Hector why ye did it. I'll stand by ye. We must both take care and not lose our patience, Norah; we must both say nothing to provoke him. But we must be

firm; it's just the thin edge of the wedge. The neighbours might be taking offence next at your buying fish on a Friday, or going to Mass and Benediction on Sunday, or——"

"Och," interrupted Norah, throwing out her hands, "it's seldom I do be goin' to Benediction now. Hector an' me used to go for walks on a Sunday—he doesn't so often take me out now—he goes off by himself—but I always have the hope that maybe he will"—she faltered, and a tear fell—"I'm afraid it's the bad Catholic I'm getting to be," she said inarticulately.

"Ah, God help ye!" said Father Pat, with infinite compassion. He paused, looking at her with deep and anxious concern.

"The two of us will have to be praying; ye must be asking every day for help and guidance, for it's a hard path ye've chosen. Ye mustn't vex your husband if ye can help it. Ye must try to be the best of the good, Norah; but ye must hold fast by your religion, and by everything that has to do with your religion. Never give him or anyone else the chance of thinking ye're ashamed of it. I'm not saying that if he did offer to take ye a walk on a Sunday evening that ye wouldn't be justified in giving up Benediction now and then so as to go with him; but I wouldn't be making a regular habit of stopping at home just on the chance. I think I'd ask him, if he didn't seem to make up his mind one way or the other."

Norah looked dubious and her brother continued:

"I'd ask him in a cheerful kind of way, if ye understand, 'Hector,' says you, 'are the two of us goin' for a stroll this evening or no?' If he says 'Yes,' well and good, but if he says he's going out on his own business, then ye say, still quite pleasant, ye know, 'I'll be goin' off to Benediction, then.' I wonder," he continued thoughtfully, "where it is Hector does be going to these

nights. He's next door to a teetotaller, so it can't be to a public-house."

"I couldn't tell ye," said Norah. "Sometimes it does be very late when he comes back. I do be in bed and asleep."

Father Pat looked at her and rubbed his chin, and said nothing for a time, but presently resumed:

"I think it would be well for ye go see the nuns. It's terrible for ye to be shut out the way ye are from all Catholic intercourse. They'll be able to help ye, and they'll maybe put ye in the way of making friends with the Catholics of this place. It's lost ye must be without one of your own religion to speak to."

"I don't know how that would be," said Norah, still doubtfully. "They might be wantin' to come here to see me, an' Hector wouldn't be likin' that"—as her brother made an impatient movement she continued hastily—"and they mightn't be likin' Hector. They're so set again' one another in this place, ye'd never believe; they're the very same as two dogs growlin' at one another."

"And Home Rule's the bone between them!" exclaimed the priest. He laughed and then grew serious. "But it's a terrible thing to have stirred up all this religious hatred again that was dead and buried so many years. A man I met in the train said to me, says he, 'There's no way of rousin' the North unless ye start on religion.'"

He pushed back his chair and began to walk about the room, his face flushing, his eyes beginning to blaze almost like Hector's. Norah looked at him apprehensively.

"Ye were sayin' I had no Catholic friends, Father Pat," she remarked, endeavouring to turn the subject, "but I have Mrs. Brady. They have a beautiful big farm a couple of miles off, an' the way they manage it 'ud delight ye. Would ye like to go over an' see them?"

"I would that," said Pat, becoming cheerful again.

When Norah had finished her work, therefore, they set forth, and spent a happy morning at the Bradys', devoting so much time to the inspection of the stock, and to walking over the land, that they arrived home rather later than they had intended.

Hector was already in the living-room and received them with a lowering brow. Norah with a sinking heart divined that he had already caught sight of the statue, which, in accordance with her brother's advice, she had restored to its former place, making it secure from outside observation, however, by drawing forward a curtain.

"I'm sorry I'm so late," she cried breathlessly, "but I've a beautiful bit of cold beef ready for ye, an' I have a fresh lettuce. It'll not matter about Father Pat an' myself waitin' a bit, as it's herrings we're havin'."

Even while speaking she had laid the table, and now darted off to the back kitchen, reappearing with the cold beef and lettuce. Hector sat down, still without speaking, and Father Pat, drawing forward a chair, entered into conversation with a well-feigned assumption of nothing being amiss.

"That's a good farm the Bradys have."

"Where's the butter, Norah?" said Hector. "I suppose there's no use askin' for potatoes?"

"I have some cold ones," cried Norah eagerly. "I'll fry them up for ye in a minute."

"I'm afraid it was my fault we were so late coming back," explained Father Pat cheerfully. "When the old fellow beyond asked me should he show me over the place, I'd no notion at all they had so much land. Three farms thrown into one, it is, they were telling me."

"Aye," said Hector, darting a look at him from under his bent brows, "and all bought with English money."

"Is that so?" said Father Pat.

"Aye," rejoined Hector, "they took Norah round one day an' showed her everything, all the fine fields they'd bought under the Land Purchase Act, and the labourers' cottages that was built for the men—with English money, too, mind ye—and rented so low that the men can afford to come to them for low wages, and what sort of gratitude do they feel, do you think?"

"Och, Hector, maybe I made a mistake," put in Norah piteously.

"Ye did not," said Hector. "One of thon lot over there told Norah the reason of the regulations over the foot-and-mouth wasn't because they were trying to stamp out the disease, but because England didn't want to give Ireland a chance."

He spoke contemptuously, and Pat reddened.

"Maybe they told her the truth!" he cried hotly. "It wouldn't be the first time England put a spoke in Ireland's wheel. Didn't they destroy her cattle-raising industry? Didn't they pull down her woollen industries and pass laws against it?"

"There ye are, forever harkin' back to things that happened hundreds of years ago," interrupted Hector. "Sure, the Covenanters were persecuted just as much as the Papists were—history'll tell ye that. But we're not goin' to turn again' our best friends just because our forefathers were treated unjustly centuries ago. Presbyterians and Church people are standing side by side now, fightin' for their liberties, an' we'll fight to the death."

"Why wouldn't we all stand side by side and fight for our liberties?" said Father Pat more gently. "Ye know, Hector, ye're altogether wrong in thinkin' if we were to get Home Rule anyone would be wanting to interfere with your religion. It isn't a question of religion at all, so it isn't. Religion is far and away above

all that. We hope we'll get our religious rights as well as our liberty under Home Rule; more, maybe, than we had in the past. But there's a human side too. It's our country we're thinking of mostly; we want the Irish race to stand united and take its place among the nations."

"Och, the usual balderdash!" cried Hector. "I've no patience with it. You're wantin' Ireland to take her place among the nations, an' the one thing you're workin' for is to put an end to the prosperity that's in the country now—to mismanage us here in the North the way ye mismanage everything ye can all over the rest of Ireland. Ye're doin' it already, well. This Home Rule Bill has killed the Land Purchase Act. Ye'd like to be taxin' us out of existence, takin' the money we've got together by our own thrift and industry, the way you priests could be drinkin' port wine and smokin' cigarettes, an' ridin' over us every way."

Father Pat burst out laughing, and clapped his hands together.

"Faith, I didn't know ye were so easily scandalised," cried he. "Norah, ye can take that bottle of port wine and pour it down the sink, and ye can put the cigarettes at the back of the fire. It's little I care for them, anyhow."

Norah, looking doubtfully at him, obeyed his behests, and the priest turned once more to his brother-in-law, with a smile which might have disarmed him:

"Now that the stumbling-block is out of the way," he said, "can't the two of us talk sense together? I'd never have brought that bottle of wine here if I'd had any notion ye'd be thinking that way about it. When I saw ye making out to be so shocked yesterday, I just kept it up out of—out of devilment, I suppose. I thought it 'ud be a bit of a treat to the two of ye, and

fancied it fell out nicely Mr. Fogarty making me a present of it just as I was paying ye my first visit. But it's little port wine comes my way, I can tell ye, and I wouldn't care if I never saw a drop again, nor whisky, either; but I'm not a teetotaller, because there's times when it's better for a man to do as others do, and take one glass of whatever's going. And I'm no smoker at all, if that's any comfort to ye."

"I don't care whether ye are or not," said Hector, "but I know well, and everyone knows, the priests are at the bottom of all this Home Rule question. They want to get the whole of the country under the dominion of the Pope."

"Now that's nonsense——" Father Pat was beginning, when Hector shouted him down.

"Ye know very well it isn't nonsense—ye know very well it's tyrants ye are. You priests want to be lordin' it over everyone, interferin' everywhere you can get a footin'. Ye weren't twenty-four hours in the house yourself before ye were ready to turn Norah again' my wishes."

"Och, Hector, indeed that's not true," cried Norah.

"Indeed, and it is true, well," thundered her husband. "The minute my back was turned to-day ye go an' take out that image an' set it up in the place I forbid ye to leave it."

"I was going to explain about that, Hector," said Pat mildly. "I was going to remind ye of the promise ye made to leave her free in everything that concerns her religion. I'm not saying she should make a parade of anything that might provoke people, but for her own private devotion she oughtn't to be hiding away what Catholics all venerate. She oughtn't to be going on as if she was ashamed of the practices of her faith."

As Hector did not speak for a moment but looked at him oddly, he continued, still in a pacific tone:

"It wouldn't be right for Norah or anyone to be goin' again' the dictates of their own conscience. Ye wouldn't respect yourself if ye was ashamed of the faith that was in ye."

"That's the true word ye've spoken," cried Hector, thumping the table heavily. "No one's to be respected who sails under false colours. I've done it myself too long. I've been keeping myself back, and holding myself in the way I wouldn't be hurtin' her feelings, but I'll stand out now for what I am. I'm an Orangeman, that's what I am, and I'm out for the liberty of the Protestant religion! I'm drillin' with the rest of the boys near every evenin'. I'll make no secret of it from this out, an' when the time comes for me to take up arms against the Nationalists, there'll not be a man 'ull fight harder nor myself. Now ye know! An' what's more, I'll catch up to the spirit as well as the letter. You can go out to your church when you like, Norah—I'll not prevent that—but I'll have no Popery in the house, an' I'll have no priest in the house——"

"Hector," cried Norah in a choked voice, "you're not meanin' Pat?"

"I'm meanin' any priest, no matter who he is," asserted Hector. "I'm going to act up to the faith that's in me, as he said himself, so I have to ax him now to walk out of this house, an' I tell ye, Norah, if any other priest comes here lookin' for ye, I'll shut the door in his face."

Norah burst into convulsive sobbing, and Pat got up. He was very angry, but controlled himself for Norah's sake.

"Ye're not yeself now, Hector," he said, "an' I'll not take any notice of the insult ye're putting on me. I'll go, because it's best that I should go, but one of these days ye'll be sorry for treating me this way. I'll go pack my bag now, Norah. Don't be fretting,

asthore, don't be breaking your heart that way. They're all mad together here, but it won't last, it can't last."

He was climbing the narrow stairs now, followed by his sister. Hector, standing in the doorway, watched them gloomily.

As they reached the upper floor he heard Norah utter an exclamation, and his face contracted; in another moment she came running down again, as white as a sheet and holding a picture in her hand.

"Ye broke my statue!" she cried almost voicelessly. "The statue my poor Da gave me for my first Communion."

"I did," said Hector savagely, "an' if ye ever get another I'll serve it the same. What's that ye've got there?"

Norah, for all answer, rushed to the hearth and thrust the picture she was holding into the flames.

"I told ye I looked on my holy statue the same way ye would be lookin' at your father's likeness," she cried. "If ye treat me this way I'll pay ye out."

"What is it ye're doing, Norah?" called Father Pat from over the stairs. "Why don't ye come help me pack my bag?"

Hector had rushed to the fire, and was frantically endeavouring to save the picture, but the worm-eaten frame burnt like tinder, and the silhouette was already destroyed.

He turned savagely to Norah, looking for a moment as though he would strike her; her blood was up and she looked back at him without flinching.

"I'll never forgive ye," said Hector. "I'll never forgive ye."

CHAPTER XXXIII

AFTER all, what first seemed to be an irreparable breach was patched up after a fashion.

Father Pat, though the main cause of Hector's outbreak, and though subject by him to the grave insult already recorded, was in some measure instrumental in bringing about a partial reconciliation.

His first involuntary exclamation on understanding what had happened effectually brought his outraged little sister to the full consciousness of what she had done.

"Och, Norah! and me after telling ye how much depended on your being good!"

Then, turning to Hector, he explained:

"She has a hot temper, and ye've tried it the way no man ought to try his wife. Ye're not able to understand how she'd feel about your destroying that statue."

"She knows very well the way I feel about my father's likeness," said Hector fiercely. "She knew it was the only one I had, and she made an end of it out of spite and revenge."

Norah had fallen on her knees, and was rocking herself backwards and forwards, striking her breast.

"God forgive me! God forgive me!" she cried. "Ye'll never believe now that it's not because I'm a Catholic I have a bad temper. I didn't rightly know what I was doing, Hector," she went on piteously. "I was—I was mad. God forgive me," she murmured once more as Hector looked down at her stonily.

"God may forgive ye," said he, "but I never will. Now then," he added, turning savagely to Father Pat, "march, I tell ye."

"I'm going," said Pat, "but I have this one word to say to ye first. Mind what ye're about, Hector. The two of ye are yoked together for life, and it's your doing. If ye had left her alone it's in her own home she'd be now; quiet, and happy, and free. 'Twas ye took her out of it, and if ye have any heart, and any feeling of honour, ye'll treat her better than this, ye'll act fair by her. It's more than her ye're answerable for now, mind that. If ye have her breaking her heart and upsetting herself this way, ye'll be destroying your own flesh and blood as well as herself. Get up now, Norah, asthore, and go about your work. The Lord will not be hard on ye, if ye *did* forget yourself; and Hector there will come round after a bit. God bless ye, now; just do the best ye can."

He kissed her, and blessed her, and went out.

Norah dried her eyes obediently and set about clearing the table. In the midst of her own heavy sorrow she was conscious of an additional pang in remembering that Father Pat had had no dinner. And only yesterday at this time she had been making preparations for his coming! Now he had been driven forth with insult, every law of hospitality had been violated, he had gone away hungry and sore at heart, carrying with him only shameful and bitter memories of his visit.

"Sit down and eat your dinner," commanded Hector.

She was about to protest, but the words died on her lips. She sat down, trembling, and helped herself to a potato, which she began to eat, swallowing with difficulty.

"Your brother spoke a true word," said Hector; "aye, he spoke many a true word the day. There's

more to be thought on than ourselves. I'll say no more to ye from this out about what's happened."

He went out without another word, and Norah sat where he had left her, trying to eat as he had told her, and trembling still.

From that day she went in fear of her husband, though she loved him. She made efforts to be the "best of the good," and to propitiate him by punctilious obedience to his wishes in everything which did not imply neglect of her religious duties. But she felt that a barrier had risen up between them, and that in his heart he would neither forget nor forgive her act of retaliation.

He was as good as his word as regarded making no secret of his active sympathy with the preparations for resistance. He drilled regularly, and occasionally paraded with the other members of the lodge to which he had become affiliated.

Honor had promised to stay with the young couple when Norah's baby was born, but much to her daughter's grief she was prevented from doing so, having had the misfortune to sprain her ankle a few days before the time fixed for her visit.

Norah read the letter aloud, bursting in the end into irrepressible sobs.

"I wish the Lord would take me out of it," she said. "I do be in dread of what's to come, and I'm—that lonesome!"

Hector's face changed, and for the first time for many weeks he spoke to her affectionately.

"Ye don't mean that, asthore," he said. "Ye wouldn't like to be leavin' me alone, and to leave the wean without a mother?"

"Maybe it 'ud be better for us all if I was to go," sighed Norah.

She leaned her head against his shoulder, neverthe-

less, and her arm stole round his neck. "I'd be glad if I could die this minute," she murmured, "with yourself givin' me a kind word and your arm round me."

He drew her more closely to him and sighed.

"I'm a hard man," he said, "an' these is hard times. But whatever falls out I'll tell ye one thing. All the love I have in the world is for ye."

He engaged a woman on his own responsibility to look after Norah during her confinement, this person having been strongly recommended to him as attentive and reliable. Norah did not venture to ask if she were a Catholic, though she would have preferred the services of a co-religionist. Indeed, she knew such an inquiry would be futile, as Hector never associated with members of her faith.

In spite of her previous melancholy, and the almost unbearable dread with which she had looked forward to her hour of trial, when it was actually upon her she found herself calm and even happy. There was no mistaking Hector's deep anxiety, and he showed himself loving and tender, as in bygone days.

It was with mutual joy and pride that they contemplated together their little son, a fine child, with lusty limbs, and a head covered with thick red-gold down.

"It's the image of his father," the nurse announced.

"Aye," said Hector proudly, "thon's a McTavish. There's no mistake about that."

Norah bloomed again during those first days of her maternity as she had bloomed as a bride; Hector surrounded her with every token of loving care.

"Be sure ye get everything she fancies," he said one day as he was leaving for his work.

"Aye, I'll do that," responded the nurse. "Ye have to be humourin' the poor bodies at these times. It's ill to cross them. As bad for the child as the mother," she added.

Towards the end of the week Norah said to her husband tentatively:

"I was thinkin' about the little one's name, Hec"—she ventured on the abbreviative now—"my poor Da was called Patrick, ye know, and there's your father was Alexander. Will we be callin' him 'Patrick Alexander'?"

"His name's Alexander," said Hector, "Alexander McTavish. Thon's the name I've always fixed to call my first son."

"Couldn't he have Patrick, too?" said Norah, with a catch in her voice.

Hector walked to the window, turning his back to her, after his habit when he did not wish to betray annoyance.

"I had it settled in my mind to have him just Alexander," he said.

"But I was always lookin' to be callin' my first boy after my Da," said Norah tremulously; "an' it 'ud be nice to have him Patrick too for every reason. Protestants do be thinking about St. Patrick as well as Catholics. I seen a thing in one of your books, makin' out that St. Patrick was a Protestant, though I couldn't believe that myself."

"We've always had just the one name in our family," said Hector, after a slight pause, during which he choked down a rising sense of irritation. "I'd like him to be just Alexander McTavish."

Norah, too, conquered an inclination to make a hot retort, and presently said:

"Well, I'll have to give in to ye, I suppose, and, after all, he can be takin' Patrick in confirmation."

"What's that?" asked Hector, wheeling suddenly.

"When a child is confirmed," explained Norah, "it has to take a saint's name, or maybe the Holy Mother's name. The girls is mostly Mary or Bridget, an' the boys is generally Patrick."

A little flush came into her face, at sight of which Hector set his lips, and mindful of the nurse's warning, refrained from further argument. As he was walking out of the room, she called out to him apprehensively.

"Come back a minute, Hector. I want to talk to ye, I want to talk to ye about havin' baby christened," she went on, as he unwillingly returned.

"Time enough for that," said he shortly.

Norah raised herself in bed, simultaneously lifting the child in her arms.

Hector looked down at the sleeping face, with its red-gold eyebrows and eyelashes, the features which even in infancy were strongly typical of the race from which the boy had sprung. A real McTavish; his child, his father's grandson! Was Alexander McTavish to be handed over to a Popish priest?

But there was Norah looking as if she were going to cry, and the woman downstairs said it would be bad for both mother and child if she were upset. Controlling himself, he said quietly:

"It's not good for ye to be excitin' yourself. We'll settle all about the christening as soon as ever ye're able to get about."

He went downstairs then, leaving Norah only partially appeased. She had been quick to notice his change of expression as he had glanced at the child, and divined his reluctance to fulfil, though she could not conceive it possible for him to break, his solemn promise.

That afternoon when Hector came in he was waylaid by the woman in charge.

"Herself's after writin' a letter," she remarked.

He looked at her with suspicious inquiry, and she continued:

"It's to Mrs. Brady, thon woman that has the big farm on the way to Strabane."

"Oh," said Hector.

"Aye, I thought I'd mention it. It's early days for her to be seein' visitors—an' they Catholics," she added.

Hector made no answer. He wondered if Norah would keep her action a secret from him, and was relieved when on the following day she herself told him that she had written.

"Ye oughtn't to be havin' visitors yet," he said.

"Ye see, I'd like to have somebody to see about things," she answered timidly; "with my mother not bein' here an' everything. I'm after axin' Mrs. Brady to stand proxy for my mother. I thought if she could go see the priest for me everything 'ud be ready for the christening as soon as I'm able to get about."

"I don't want thon woman here," said Hector. "Let her wait till ye are down. I bid ye wait till you're well before there's any talk o' the christening. I thought ye were always makin' out to do as I bid ye."

"So I will, so I will," she promised eagerly. Catching hold of him she pulled him towards her. "Hector, Hector, ye'll never—ye'll not——"

Her voice failed her; though he had stooped towards her his face was set, and he made no attempt to kiss her. The words came at last almost in a cry, "Ye won't break your promise—ye won't want to take the child to the Protestant church?"

"What's the matter?" asked the nurse, coming in at the sound of the raised voice. "Tut, tut, thon's no face for the mother of a baby five days old! Lie down and rest. You go out an' smoke your pipe, Mr. McTavish."

"Och, Hector, don't go—promise me first," whispered Norah.

"I'll not take him either to church or meetin'-house, well," said he, almost with a snarl. "Ye're to lie still, an' if Mrs. Brady comes, tell her she's to wait. As I said, I'll have no talk of the christenin' till ye're better."

He went out of the room, and Norah was forced to be content; but nevertheless her heart misgave her. She could not forget his expression as he looked at the child, and how determined he had been in not yielding in the matter of his name.

When Mrs. Brady eventually came, Norah could not help letting that good woman divine some of her uneasiness, and was conscious of a further sinking of the heart as she saw her friend's expression change.

"Ah, well," said Mrs. Brady, "if ye have to delay a few days to satisfy him, ye can't be blamed for it. But don't delay it too long. Childer is chancey things. I've seen the finest of them snapped away in an hour, maybe, with croup or some such thing. Sure, ye know," she added confidentially, "there's no difficulty at all about gettin' a child christened. Myself or one of the girls could easily give notice to the priest for ye; aye, or one of us could take the child up any time; we could run there and back within half an hour."

Their eyes met, but nothing further was said.

Norah, though cheered by the visit, was alarmed by the elder woman's warning.

If anything were to happen to the child, and he not baptised! It would be a calamity too terrible to contemplate: setting aside the anguish of losing him she would be answerable for his soul.

She endeavoured to be patient, however, and to be as submissive as possible in her manner to her husband, who, on his part, relapsed into a condition of taciturnity bordering on moroseness.

It is a common saying that members of one generation pay over to their successors the love which they have themselves received from their own parents. This was certainly the case with Hector. He had loved and revered his father, but the passionate tenderness which the latter felt for him had never awakened a

similar response in his heart. Now he worshipped the baby Alexander with the same worship as his father had given him, and this very worship aroused in him a feeling of something like antagonism towards his wife; and a sense of remorse with regard to that long-dead father.

Alexander McTavish the elder had been a martyr to his convictions—so Hector often boasted—was Alexander the second to be brought up in direct opposition to those convictions? Was he, Hector, to have no rights where the child was concerned? If Norah, and her priests with her, held that she was bound to secure to any child of hers what they were pleased to call "its birthright," was not the father equally bound? Was he to submit without a qualm to see his own child taught doctrines which he condemned, and initiated into practices which he held to be idolatrous? He would sit by himself in the deserted room downstairs pondering over these things; and he had little to say to Norah or anyone else.

When Norah at last left her room, looking pale and pretty, however, his heart melted within him. He expressed the pleasure he felt at finding her installed by the kitchen fire, and made some cheerful remark about it being like old times again.

"But it's new times, too," said Norah, glancing downwards at the baby.

"Aye," rejoined Hector, and his smile faded.

"I'll not feel rightly easy in my mind till he's christened; something might be happenin' him."

"Many a one isn't baptised till he's grown up," remarked her husband.

"Och, but them's not right Christians," exclaimed Norah, shocked.

"They are, then," rejoined Hector, "good Christians, some of them."

She was silent for a moment, and then said, in a voice which, in spite of her, was plaintive:

"May I ask Mrs. Brady to come with me next week to take the child to the priest?"

As he stood silently towering over her, she glanced nervously in his face. The sort of fear of him of which she had been conscious after their first rupture, the knowledge of some force within him held in check, some depth of wrathful feeling ineffectually hidden by a superficial calm, returned to her now. She would have liked to run from him and hide, to withdraw in haste the request which might provoke an outburst, but her conscience urged her to proceed.

"Next week," she repeated timidly.

"I'd have liked to put off talkin' of it a bit longer," he said, in a muffled voice, "but as ye will have it, I'll tell ye my mind now. I'll keep my word to ye, Norah, this far—I'll not have the child baptised now by any minister of my own religion. I'll not have him baptised at all till he's old enough to judge for himself, and choose which of us he will follow."

Norah sprang up; she was still weak, and swayed as she stood. He caught her and forced her, not ungently, back into her chair.

"You've got to make up your mind to it, for thon's my resolve an' I'll stick to it."

"Ye're breakin' your solemn promise," gasped Norah. "Ye promised ye'd bring up any child we'd have a Catholic. How can he be a Catholic if he's allowed to grow up that way?"

"He can be taught to fear God and do his duty," said Hector, "an' he can go to the National school. He can leave church or chapel alone till he's old enough to choose."

"It's the wickedest thing that ever I heard of," gasped Norah, choking with grief and wrath. "It's

bringin' him up a heathen ye'd be doin'. What chance would he have of doin' right if that's the way it's to be? What sort of a man are ye at all, that ye can break your promise?—that he could rob your own child of what's better than life——"

"Now listen here," cried he, "I've had enough of this. Thon promise that ye're throwin' in my teeth was a rash promise. If I did right I'd set it aside altogether. I promised my father before ever I promised ye, or any of your priests. I promised my father on his death-bed I'd be true to my relegion. But it's a traitor to my relegion I'd be if I handed my son over to any of thon crew."

Norah lay back in her chair, too much overcome to speak, and Hector turned away. He was fast losing self-control, and the sight of her suffering only incensed him more.

"He's a McTavish, when all's said and done," he went on, "an' there never was a McTavish a Papist. If he agrees to follow ye when he makes his choice, he'll be no son of mine. It's goin' again' my conscience I am in settlin' for him to have that choice, but I'll agree to that to satisfy ye."

"Ye'll agree till something happens to make ye change your mind," said Norah.

He wheeled about once more and looked at her; she felt as if his gaze burnt her.

"Don't go too far," he said. "I'd advise ye for your own sake not to go too far. You an' me are different, an' are like to differ more—but this boy's mine—he's the dearest thing I have. I'll no sacrifice him, I tell ye. I'll make sure ye don't steal a march on me," he went on, the tide of passion within him leaping higher and higher. "Look me in the face, now!"

She raised her eyes, scornful but piteous.

"Listen to me," he went on, "this is to be as I've said. Ye've to give me your word—ye've to swear ye'll

not take that child to your church, or ask any of the priests to christen him."

"I will not, then," said Norah; her voice was very weak, but she showed spirit. "I'll not swear away my child's soul."

"Well, we'd best understand each other," resumed Hector, and his voice was deadly calm. "Unless ye do make the promise I'll take the wean away and have him brought up a Protestant out and out. I'm no such great friends with my mother these few years, but she's a good, releeigious woman, an' she'd do her duty by the boy if I put him in her care."

"You couldn't do such a thing as that!" stammered Norah.

"I could, though, an' the law 'ud be on my side," he announced with a triumph that was almost vindictive. "Now, we'll have an end of this matter, once an' for all. Where's the Bible?"

He crossed to the fireplace and took down his pocket Testament from a corner of the mantelpiece.

"Ye'll swear on the Bible, Norah—no, you Papists have no right respect for the Bible—what is it ye do respect?"

Catching sight of her rosary on the table by her, he seized hold of the crucifix and held it before her.

"Ye'll swear on that cross that ye'll never take him to church or chapel unknownst to me, or let anyone else take him to the priests here to be christened."

Norah hesitated, and he cried fiercely:

"Do ye want *me* to swear that I'll take the child away from ye?"

His hand, twitching with wrath, groped for the book which he had laid on the table.

"I'll swear it," said Norah feebly, and she raised the cross to her lips. "I'll swear I won't do it without your knowin', but I——"

"That'll do," said Hector grimly.

CHAPTER XXXIV

It would be impossible to describe the abyss of wretchedness into which Norah was now plunged. The height to which her simple faith reached made the depth of her despair the more profound, the darkness more impenetrable.

Her disappointment in Hector, the fact that, though living under one roof, they were now scarcely on speaking terms, counted for little as compared with her awful sense of wickedness. She deemed her own soul lost as well as that of her child. That promised choice of Hector's was a mere mockery, as she well knew. The boy would naturally take part with the father, being used from his very infancy to find his mother's claim discountenanced. The possibility never occurred to her that the oath which she had been forced to take was not absolutely binding, though she deemed herself guilty of blasphemy in uttering it. Added to the conviction of spiritual reprobation there was an equally strong sense of shame and disgrace. She went to Mass, indeed, as heretofore, but avoided the confessional: of what use to confess a sin which she deemed unforgivable? She shrank even from admitting the state of affairs to her own brother, and her letters to Honor were brief and unsatisfactory.

One day the priest whom she had interviewed previous to Father Pat's visit, called, but Norah caught sight of him from behind the curtain and did not go to the door.

His repeated knocks aroused the sleeping baby, who cried, thus betraying the mother's presence; and after a time, rightly concluding that Norah did not wish to see him, the visitor went away.

One of the neighbours reported this circumstance to Hector, and on entering the house he addressed his wife with a softened air:

"I hear the priest called, an' ye didn't let him in—it was well done of ye to mind what I laid down for ye."

"It was a shame and a disgrace," broke out Norah, "but ye have me shamed an' disgraced every way. I couldn't be lookin' the priest in the face."

Hector threw himself heavily into a chair.

"Hand over the wean," he said, after a pause.

She lifted the baby out of the cradle and set him on his father's knee.

Hector looked down at him with all the rugged lines of his face softened; he chirruped and snapped his fingers, and the child kicked and crowed. Norah watched them with a sharp pang; her husband had no word, no look for her who had given him this child. He seemed rather to resent her having any part in him.

One afternoon as she was busy with some sewing, sitting in the parlour for coolness' sake, somebody passed the window, and immediately afterwards there came a knock at the door.

With her recently acquired caution Norah inspected the new-comer before attending to the summons; peering out from behind the curtain, she espied a tall woman in a blue cloak.

With a gasping cry she ran to the door and flung it open, to find that, as she had surmised, Honor was standing on the threshold.

"Och, Mother, Mother! Come in out o' that, come in. Och, I don't know whether to be glad or sorry ye've come."

"Sorry, is it!" said Honor, stepping in and closing the door behind her. "Me that hasn't seen ye for goin' on eighteen months now! Let me look at ye, child! It's the ghost ye are, Norah! What is it ails ye? How was it ye didn't write to tell me if things were goin' wrong?"

"Why would I have ye breakin' your heart as well as myself?" rejoined Norah.

"It's a lovely place ye've got," said Honor, looking round with wistful admiration at the comfortable room. "Troth, ye might be a real lady. What is it that's wrong with ye at all? Sure, ye never tell me a thing about the child. Is it not right in its head, do ye think? Is it a cripple or anything that way?"

"God bless us! he is not," returned Norah indignantly. "Will ye come upstairs an' have a look at him? He's asleep on the bed."

As Honor followed her daughter up the stairs she almost whispered:

"It's Hector that isn't good to ye? He takes drink, maybe?"

"He does not," said Norah, turning round on the narrow landing. "There couldn't be a more sober or steadier man nor what he is. The child's wakin' up on me."

She turned and ran into the bedroom, picking up the six-months-old baby, flushed and drowsy still.

"Och, God bless him!" ejaculated Honor, bestowing loud kisses on the rosy face. "It's a fine child he is! The very moral of his father, but bigger nor he was at this age."

"He has a tooth through," said Norah, with a wan smile.

Honor gazed at her searchingly over the child's head; she had taken it into her arms, and was now rocking it backwards and forwards.

"Ah, many's the time I carried your Da this way," she said, addressing the baby, though she did not remove her eyes from the mother's face. "I had Father Pat with me last week," she went on. "I was tellin' him it was unaisy I was feelin' about he—ye writin' so seldom, an' never lettin' on anything about yeself, an' he advised me to come straight off an' see how ye are gettin' on."

"Did he say anything about me an' Hector?" Norah asked in a low voice.

"He told me what he kept back before, not wishin' to upset me. Norah, tell me the truth now. Was that child christened in the Protestant church?"

"He isn't christened at all," said Norah. "Och, Mother, I'll have to own to ye how it all fell out; but it's ashamed I am to look ye in the face."

And thereupon she related brokenly the story of all that had occurred since the baby's birth.

Honor wept and groaned as she heard her. The shame and misery in her daughter's face was reflected in her own. Finally, however, she dried her eyes and sat up.

"He seems to have tied ye up every way. Ye're not to take the child to any priest to be christened, or let anyone else take him, an' no priest is to be allowed here. I've half a mind to christen him myself. It's enough to bring a judgment on us all to have him left that way."

"It wouldn't be right to do that," answered Norah. "I've thought of it many a time an' looked in the Catechism, but it says only 'In danger of death.'"

"Did ye ask the priest?" said Honor.

"I was ashamed to ask the priest," faltered Norah. "I haven't been to confession since the little fella was born. Och, it isn't only the shame, it's the dread. I'm in dread of what Hector might do."

"Ye oughtn't to stop with him," said her mother.

"If that's the way it is it 'ud be best for ye to come home with me now—yourself and the baby. It can't be right for ye to be goin' on the way ye are. Maybe sooner nor give the two o' yez up out and out, Hector 'ud be willin' to hear *raison*. It must be some kind of madness has come over him, an' this 'ull bring him to his senses."

"He'd never give in, though," said Norah, with chattering teeth. "He'd take the child out and out. He said he would, and the law of the land 'ud support him."

"Maybe it would, indeed," rejoined Honor with a sigh. She had all the peasant's horror of the Law.

At this moment a step was heard in the passage below, and Hector's voice called:

"Is dinner ready?"

"It's Himself!" ejaculated Norah. She stood still, paralysed with fear, but Honor stepped to the door.

"Come up here, Hector McTavish. I want to speak to ye."

"Who's that?" said Hector.

He mounted the stairs, two steps at a time, and paused in front of the two women just inside the bedroom door. Honor stood with the folds of her cloak thrown back, the child, which had fallen asleep again, lying on her broad bosom. Her face, haggard with fatigue and worn with much sorrow, was pale, but her eyes glowed.

"Come here, Hector McTavish, ye that I used to be callin' the son of my heart, and nursed as a son many a time. Look at this child that's lyin' on my breast now, an' that's my flesh an' blood the same as yours. Tell me how it is ye have the heart to treat him as ye're doin'?"

"Mrs. Burke," said Hector roughly; "I've no greater respect for any woman in the world than I have for

ye, an' I owe ye more than respect for what ye've done for me in the past. But there's times when a man must act for himself, and do what he thinks right without givin' way to anyone. I'm glad to see ye in our house—there's no one more welcome; but I've this to say: If ye are to stop here, as I hope ye will"—each time that Hector proffered this invitation his voice softened, but his grim face never relaxed—"ye'll have to give me your word that ye'll not be plottin' an' plannin' to take the child to the priests, or to——"

"I'll make no promise," interrupted Honor. "My house was open to yourself day an' night. I was never so pleased as when I had ye about the place, an' if ye're for turnin' me out now, ye can do it, but I'll not make a promise it 'ud be wrong to keep."

"Hector," cried Norah, starting forward, her face white as a sheet, her eyes dilated, "if ye turn my mother out o' this house I'll go with her."

At the sound of Norah's uplifted tones the baby woke and cried, stretching out his arms.

"An' leave thon?" asked Hector, pointing to him.

"Whist, mavourneen," said Honor quickly. "How could ye leave the child an' it not weaned? No; it's myself that'll go. I'm better away. Ye can go downstairs, Hector, an' get your own dinner for once. I'll have one hour's talk with my daughter before I go. Ye can't prevent that."

Hector walked sullenly out of the room, closing the door, and went heavily downstairs. He utterly detested his own attitude, and was conscious that the two women sitting upstairs must consider it one of base ingratitude. Nevertheless, his will remained fixed, and he told himself that at all costs he would adhere to his resolution. What had to be must be. Let them hate and despise him as they liked, he would not flinch from what he knew was right.

He wondered what they were saying up there; he could hear the murmuring voices, and now and then the sound of weeping, at which he ground his teeth impatiently; then the voices would sink so low as to be scarcely distinguishable. They were plotting something, perhaps. Well, let them plot—he was strong enough to circumvent them.

By and by Honor came downstairs alone, and looked into the living-room where Hector was seated at table.

"I'm goin' now," she announced.

He got up and went towards her.

"Come in an' have something to eat first," he said.

"I'll not touch bite nor sup in this house," said Honor.

"One of these days, Hector, ye'll come to your senses, an' ye'll be sorry. Good-bye to ye now."

She went out, leaving him standing in the doorway, a dull flush spreading over his face.

CHAPTER XXXV

It was the morning of the "Twelfth"; wondrous excitement had prevailed in the town during the preceding day, and the beat of the Orange drums, rehearsing for the procession, had been heard even in the small hours of the morning.

Hector had risen early, and had adorned himself with the insignia of his own particular lodge.

The gloom which had enshrouded him of late had given place to an air of fierce exultancy; thus might an Indian chief have set forth on the war-path.

Norah too had been afoot betimes to get ready his breakfast. While he was partaking of it she washed and dressed the child, and was preparing to place him in his cradle when Hector desired her to set the little fellow on his knee.

She obeyed with a sigh; Hector's devotion to his son seemed to increase every day, and the affection which he lavished on him never failed to evoke in Norah mingled sensations of something that was almost jealousy, and passionate regret for the days when no cloud had come between them. She did not understand the many shades of feeling which entered into this devotion. Besides the natural tenderness which any right-minded man must feel for his first-born, there was the pride of proprietorship, and a sense of triumph and rejoicing in the fact that here, at least, he could love without remorseful prickings of conscience. The baby eyes could not reproach him—the child's will could not oppose his. "And never will," Hector would sometimes

say to himself. Alexander McTavish the second would, when he grew older, be grateful to the father, who had, at much cost to himself, secured to him the religion which had been handed down to him from his Covenanting forebears. Already, as may be seen, he discounted the nature of the "choice" which the boy was to make on coming to the years of discretion.

The kettle was boiling over, and Norah turned to the hearth to lift it off. When she looked round again she found her husband in the act of tying an orange sash round the child's waist; the latter, catching at the bright ribbon, chuckled ecstatically.

"That's my laddie," cried Hector jubilantly. "He knows what's right, so he does! Aye, catch hold of thon, sonny; catch hold of thon and hold it fast."

Getting up with the boy in his arms he carried him to the door, where he stood for a moment or two, dangling him.

Many people had already collected in the street, and some of these turned, laughing and pointing at little Alexander.

"Thon's a chip of the old block," said one.

"Aye," rejoined Hector, "he's a brave wee Orangeman."

He went back into the house presently, finding Norah standing where he had left her. He noticed, as he gave her the child, that she was very pale, but she said nothing.

"I'll be away all day," he remarked, as he turned to leave the house.

When the door closed behind him Norah laid the baby in his cradle and sat down. She waited a few moments until she was sure that Hector did not intend to return, then she drew a letter from her pocket and read it over.

"Dear Norah," wrote Father Pat, "I have heard from

my mother the way it is with you and Hector, and I think the best thing you can do is to come home with the child for a few days. He can't forbid you that. You must insist on coming, whether or no. I will arrange to join you at Cloon-na-hinch whatever time you come. Send me a telegram to say you've started. I enclose a P.O. for your ticket. Lose no time; you are doing a terrible wrong to your child in keeping him unbaptised."

She looked across to the cradle, where little Alexander lay cooing to himself and playing with the orange ribbon.

"A slave of the devil"—those were the words of the Catechism. It was the Sacrament of Baptism which changed the slaves of the devil into children of light.

It seemed to her the orange ribbon was the very badge of the bondage, in which, in her cowardice, she had left her son.

Getting up quickly she dashed across the room, tore off the ribbon, and thrust it into the flames; her mind was made up at last.

When Hector returned, after a long and tiring day, a day, moreover, enlivened by many alarms and excursions, he was surprised to find his house door locked. It was unlike Norah to be out at this hour.

Turning with some irritation to the window he found it unfastened, in accordance with his wife's custom on those occasions when she chanced to go out before his return from work, and opening it, he possessed himself of the key which was hung up as usual behind the window curtain.

Letting himself into the house he looked round angrily, and the first sight that caught his gaze was the empty cradle.

"A pretty thing for her to be taking the child out at

this time of the evening, with the streets so crowded and so many drunken folk about!" he said to himself.

She evidently intended to be absent for some time. The table was spread, and Hector's supper of cold meat and bread and cheese was laid out. He noticed that only one place was laid.

With a deepening misgiving he rushed upstairs, finding in the bedroom unmistakable evidences of a hasty flight. Drawers stood open, articles of wearing apparel were strewn on the bed; Norah's best hat and jacket had been removed from the wardrobe.

"It's gone home she has!" he exclaimed, and searched the room more closely, expecting to find a note addressed to himself; but none such appeared.

He turned, and began to descend the stairs in a dazed way, finding when he reached the passage below that his next-door neighbour was standing in the doorway.

"Can you tell me where my wife is?" he asked in a choked voice.

"Didn't he know?" returned she, in apparent amazement. "She went off early this morning, herself an' the child; I noticed she was carrying a bundle."

"She's gone home to her mother for a bit," rejoined Hector, endeavouring to speak in a casual tone, though he raged inwardly.

"It was a quare thing she wouldn't be tellin' ye, then," retorted the woman.

"She did say somethin' about wantin' to go, but I didn't give my consent," returned he, still with an effort to appear calm.

"She's gone without it, well," sneered the other. Then she added: "I'm sorry for ye, Mr. McTavish; it's hard for a staunch Protestant an' a good Orangeman like yourself to have his child christened a Papist."

She voiced the secret dread which was shaping itself in Hector's mind, and the man fairly staggered.

"What makes ye say that?" he cried hoarsely.

"Come upstairs an' I'll tell ye," returned the other. "Wasn't her mother here a while back; didn't the two of them sit up above here talkin'?" He nodded, speechless, and she continued: "Do ye see thon cupboard in the wall? The door swings open often—I have one the same in my place—when the two doors is open together every word that anyone says in here can be heard in my house. Well, when I was sittin' by myself in my room thon day, I heard the two of them talkin' as plain as anything, an' it was about nothing but christening the child. 'Let him be once christened,' says the strange woman, 'an' it's a Catholic he'll *have* to be. He'll be forced to choose it,' says she. 'Once the priest pours the holy water over his head it'll put the Catholic spirit in him,' says she."

Hector glared at her, with the mixture of wrath and covert fear of an animal at bay.

"There does be witchcraft mixed up with it," she went on in a low voice. "It's the quare things they do with that same holy water, as they call it. Aye, there's them that laughs at it, but it's true what thon woman said; it's quare an' often them that's christened Catholics unknownst—the way them treacherous Papists does be doin' sometimes—*does* choose to be Catholics when they're grown up."

Hector stood, still fixing her with his bloodshot gaze. "When did she go?" he asked at length.

"Why, she was out of this soon after seven this mornin'. Where is it she lives, do you say? Where's this her home is—Connemara? She'll have got there by this time."

"But they won't have done anything yet," said Hector from between his set teeth; "there's a chance—just a chance! It's in the chapel they'd be wantin' to do it. It wouldn't be at night."

"Are ye goin' after her?" asked the other.

"Aye, I'm goin' after her," said he. "I'll bring her back, no fear—but as for the wean—maybe I'll be bringin' the wean somewhere else."

He strode to the table, cut himself off a slice of meat, and swallowed it hastily, then he glanced at the woman, who still stood staring at him.

"Ye can go out o' this, for I'm goin' to lock up the house," he said.

Half pushing her out, he rushed along the street, bursting presently into the bar of a certain public-house frequented by many of his comrades.

Drawing aside two or three of these, he announced in a low voice:

"Brothers, I want your help badly in a serious matter."

They pressed round him curious, even a little alarmed.

"What's thon?" asked one.

"Ye can count on us, well," said another.

"My wife's run off from me," said Hector hoarsely; "an' she's taken the wee fellow to make a Papist of him."

There was a murmur of indignation and excitement.

"Aye," went on Hector. "He'll be baptised to-morrow by a Popish priest, unless we are in time to prevent it. Who'll travel with me to Connemara this night to put a stop to this devilish business?"

"To Connemara?" exclaimed someone. "Why, it's half the length of Ireland from here!"

"Ye'll no catch a train here the night," added someone else.

"I'd catch a train from Enniskillen, though," cried Hector, "an' we that's dispatch-riders could spin there on our motor-bikes easy. I'd ride the whole way myself, for that matter, if there was no train, but I think we can get one at Enniskillen."

"It's fifty-nine miles to Enniskillen," remonstrated the first speaker.

"Aye," said Hector, "an' it's near two hundred to Cloon-na-hinch. I'd do it in eight hours if I had to go all the way. I will do it, I say, and I count on ye, brothers, to help me. We may have to fight for what we want, but there's a chance of bein' in time to save the child."

His eyes blazed with a fanatical enthusiasm which proved infectious; one by one the men silently grasped his hand.

"When do we start?" they asked after a pause.

"Now," rejoined Hector, "only the time to get the bikes and"—he dropped his voice—"anything else we may need. Meet at Bishopsgate in ten minutes' time."

They went out, each vanishing silently in the direction of his home; and a little later set forth as silently for their expedition under the stars.

A strange journey was that, cutting across from one point to another, by rail where it was possible to proceed by rail—and owing to the holiday they were fortunate enough to hit upon belated excursion trains conveying recent partakers in the Orange demonstration to their various homes. They got over a portion of the road in a cattle-truck, their plea of "urgent public business" inducing the guard to connive at the informality, and, where it was not possible to proceed otherwise, they sped along on their motor-bicycles.

The summer dawn was breaking as they rode through Cloon-na-hinch village, which was still wrapped in slumber; except for the crowing of a cock or two, and the barking of an occasional dog, there was no sign of life about the place.

Once outside the little hamlet, Hector sprang off his machine, signing to his comrades to do the same, and

they proceeded cautiously on foot to Honor Burke's farm.

The homestead stood before them at last, absolutely quiet in the grey morning light; blinds drawn, a faint coil of smoke from the smouldering turf fire that was never extinguished on the kitchen hearth, mounting up slowly in the still air.

But if the aroma of it greeted Hector's nostrils it brought with it no fragrant memories. The sight of the sleeping house, the white walls of which had so often sheltered him in his childhood, the shadowy outline of Norah's window, which had been to him in his manhood as a beacon of dreams, roused no stir in his heart. He was possessed, dominated by one absorbing idea to be in time to outwit these three who had once been his dearest, but who now appeared to him in the guise of deadly enemies, to baulk them of their prey. It was thus in his frenzy that he framed his own design to himself.

He gloated over the quiet of the place; it was well that he should catch the household thus sleeping. Taken by surprise they would be the more readily coerced.

He posted his men at different points round the house, and went forward alone.

"Norah!" he cried.

He flung a sod of earth at the little window of the room which had once been hers, but where as a matter of fact Father Pat was sleeping now, too soundly to be awakened even by the angry cry.

Norah, however, who lay beside her mother in the larger room, slumbering brokenly with her child upon her arm, raised her head quickly.

"Mother," she whispered. "Mother, Hector's come!"

"My God!" exclaimed Honor under her breath, "an' the child's not christened yet!"

Hector had, in fact, been right in his surmise. Norah had reached home late on the previous night, as much exhausted as the baby in her arms. When Father Pat had arrived later still, both mother and child were in bed and asleep. It had been considered advisable to postpone the ceremony till the morrow, when all intended to set out for the chapel at an early hour.

The Burke family, unused to travel, had not considered the possibility of Hector appearing before at least twenty-four hours had elapsed.

Honor got up and approached the window, cautiously peering through a slit in the wooden shutter.

"Aye, he's there," she murmured, "an' there's two or three other men with him. God bless us, it's pistols they have in their hands!"

"They want to frighten us," whispered Norah, and her teeth chattered.

"Wait a minute," said Honor; "give me the child here, an' I'll run with it to Father Pat, an' let him make it safe. If Hector gets too outrageous ye can open the window an' talk to him, but take as long as ye can about it. I'll call out when the christening's done."

"Are ye there?" shouted Hector, and he hammered on the little window which he supposed to be Norah's with the butt end of his revolver.

The loud fierce tones, followed by the shattering of glass, roused Father Pat, and he jumped out of bed just as his mother rushed into the room, carrying the sleeping baby.

"Get up, avick, get up! Hector's here with two or three others, an' it's pistols they have. Make haste an' christen the little fellow, for I'm afeared we must give him up."

"Have ye a sup of water ready?" asked Father Pat, as he hastily drew his trousers over his nightshirt.

"Och, God forgive me, there's not a drop in the

house! I meant to be up early an' get it. We used the last to wash the baby."

Hector was now shaking the crazy casement; in another moment he would have burst it in, but that Norah called out from her room at the other end of the house:

"Who's there? What is it ye want?"

"It's me," said Hector, hastening towards the window whence her voice proceeded; "your husband. I've come for my son."

She unfastened the window, fumbling with the bolts.

"If ye'll wait a minute while I get my clothes on, I'll come out."

"Let me in," cried Hector hoarsely; "let me in this minute! Where's the wean?"

He endeavoured to peer into the dusky room, but could distinguish nothing. After a moment Norah's white face appeared in the aperture of the window.

"Whist, he's asleep! Och, Hector, there's men with ye; give me time to put on a few clothes."

Hector for all answer flung himself against the house door.

"If ye're up to any tricks with thon wean," he • shouted thickly, "I'll have your life, Pat Burke."

"He's breakin' in the door," gasped Honor; "hurry up into the loft. It can't be helped about the child, an' if ye're quick ye can lep out on the hayrick. They're all comin' round this side now. Run, quick—run!"

But Pat snatched the wailing babe, and clutched it to him as he hurried up the ladder which led to the loft. He cast an anxious glance round, but to no purpose. Since the visit he had paid at the time of his own ordination no one had slept in that upper chamber, and there was not a drop of water in the place.

The battering at the door downstairs continued; in another instant the pursuers would be within. Still

holding the child to him, he pushed up the skylight, thrusting his hand into the outer air. A fine close rain was falling.

Rain! He might succeed yet!

Dragging a chair beneath the skylight, he clambered through, still holding his burden fast, just as Hector, breaking in the door, burst into the kitchen. Honor flung herself upon him, but he wrenched himself free, as a warning shout came from without:

"Look out, Mr. McTavish, he's on the roof!"

Hector remembered the skylight well, and remembered, too, a favourite prank of his own boyhood; many a time had he and his foster-brother clambered through it to the roof, and thence leaped on to the hayrick which generally stood in tempting proximity. Sometimes the sloping thatch top of this afforded a perilous enough footing to the hare-brained lads, but at other times there would be a ledge on which they could land securely, and there was even one stage, before the rick was complete and the top shaped, when they could play about on its broad summit to their hearts' content, and in perfect security.

Like a flash the memory came to him now of having, on approaching the house a little while ago, unconsciously taken note of the fact that the building of Honor's hayrick was unfinished, and that the flat top had been roughly covered with a sheet of tarpaulin to protect it from the weather.

He sprang up the stairs and climbed upon the roof, just in time to see Pat, with the child in his arms, leap safely on to this tarpaulin, and, stooping quickly, scoop up some of the water which had collected in a hollow of the imperfectly spread cloth.

With a roar Hector sprang in pursuit; but half-blinded by passion and trembling in every limb, failed in the attempt. He jumped short and fell heavily,

fifteen or sixteen feet, his leg doubled under him on the ground.

Father Pat, who had paused, startled, and suffered the water to run through his fingers, stooped once more, balancing the babe.

"I baptise thee—" he began.

Hector, with a cry that was scarcely human, fired his revolver, but the projecting edge of the stack protected the priest, who crouched low, shielding the child with his body.

"Shoot," cried Hector then to his lieutenants, "shoot, but for God's sake mind the wean!"

A bullet sang through the air, and the priest's right arm dropped useless, his white shirt-sleeve being immediately drenched with blood.

Norah, who had rushed out into the open, gave a wild cry.

"Come down, Pat, for the love o' God! Give in, or they'll murder ye."

Three or four shots rang sharply out in quick succession, but Pat, steadying himself, laid the baby flat on the tarpaulin and scooped up water with his left hand, repeating the action while he pronounced the all-important words:

"I baptise thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen!"

While he was yet speaking Hector, beside himself, tossed his revolver to one of his comrades who had emptied the last chamber of his own; and even as the "Amen" fell from the priest's lips, this man fired.

The change of weapons appeared to have brought him success, for Pat, with a groan, collapsed in his place.

Loud shouts were heard from the gate and six or seven men, half dressed, came rushing through, headed by Billy Brophy, who, rudely awakened in his lair in the

barn, had crept away to give the alarm. One or two of these new-comers were armed with revolvers and the rest carried stout sticks.

In a moment the air was full of the sickening sounds of blows; more shots were fired, and the man who held the smoking pistol which had laid the priest low fell to the ground.

A couple of constables now appeared on the scene, and more and more reinforcements rushed up from the village, seeing which the hopelessly outnumbered Northmen beat a hasty retreat.

Some of the Cloon-na-hinch people were for hurrying in pursuit, and others hastened to join the group which had surrounded Hector and were fiercely dealing with him, prostrate though he was. The policemen, seeking to restrain them, ran the risk of being roughly handled in their turn; but all at once silence and stillness fell upon them, for Father Pat raised his head.

"Leave him alone," he called out in tones amazingly strong, considering his plight. "Boys, leave that man alone, I command ye! Let them all go, and"—here his voice faltered—"bring me to my mother."

They dragged the ladder out of the kitchen and set it up against the stack.

The child, covered with blood, but unhurt, was carried down and placed in Norah's arms, and carefully lifting Father Pat they brought him to where Honor sat on the trampled grass, and laid him down so that his head could rest on her lap.

As they did so, a shade came over his face and for a moment she thought he was dead. He opened his eyes, however, and his lips moved.

"Hector, too," he said.

Hector was lying apart, a mere heap of bruised and battered humanity; blood was oozing from his mouth; but him, too, they lifted in obedience to the priest,

giving him into the arms which at her son's word Honor stretched out to receive him. Once more the red head rested beside the black one on the lap where they had both been so often pillowed.

If it be true that at the moment of dissolution a full vision is given to the departing soul of the beauty and goodness of God, the enjoyment or loss of which constitutes in fact heaven and hell, may not this all-comprehensive knowledge include the understanding of its fellow man?

So near death was Hector that his spirit, hovering on the very edge of the abyss, beheld the lifting of the veils; looking into his brother's glazing eyes, he realised for the first time the sublimity of that faith in which Pat had laid down his life—the very faith of Peter who walked upon the waters, who said: "Thou knowest that I love Thee."

The priest, too, his priest's faculties sharpened and spiritualised with a foretaste of that omniscience which should soon be his, contemplated his brother's spirit, and recognised the natural rectitude, the sincerity, the high ideals which lay hidden away behind inherited prejudice; and which even the revived bigotry and intolerance of the times had failed to crush.

Soul struggled towards soul with returning love, coupled in Hector's case with remorse and sorrow, in Father Pat's with compassion and ardent zeal.

Hector with a mighty effort breathed the word:
"Patsie!"

The priest's useless arm twitched as he vainly endeavoured to raise it, and his pale lips opened for the last time:

"*Ego te absolvo*," said Father Pat.

Doctor Bodkin, who had been hastily summoned, hurried up presently to find Honor bending over the

two prostrate forms, whose heads lay so close together in her lap that the blood-stained hair mingled. The eyes of both were closed, but through Hector's lashes tears were slowly trickling. The doctor examined Pat first.

"He is quite dead," he said; and then he turned to Hector, a longer pause ensuing before he spoke.

"There's a chance for him," he said. "Yes, I think he'll hang on to life—I hope he'll use it to repent of this day's black work."

"Och, doctor, whist!" gasped Honor. "Sure they have each other by the hand!"

And with that she broke into sobbing.

The doctor straightened himself, his thoughts going back to that day twenty-five years ago when he had likened Honor, the bounteous mother, to Ireland herself. Was this to be Ireland's future, to mourn like Rachel over her slain?

But then his glance fell on Norah standing by, tearless, a very statue of grief, and he saw that she held a lusty babe in her arms—a babe whose brow was wet with baptismal dews, whose clothes were drenched with other drops scarcely less sacred, and he told himself that perhaps it, too, was typical of Ireland—a new Ireland that might achieve great things, though it was the child of blood and tears.

THE END

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